



**everyone who knows me, knows i love by
everybreathemove**

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Summary: El Hopper is surprised to find herself the center of attention when — after forgetting her cell phone in the locker rooms — her private texts with a contact known only as 'Waffle Boy' are posted all over the school. It doesn't take long for rumors to start spreading, and soon enough everybody is trying to unmask her mystery boyfriend. / Longer summary inside. (Three-shot.)

1. one

I can't wait until tomorrow...

El would been lying if she said she'd been able to think about anything else all morning.

Granted, she's only been awake for like twenty minutes but that's beside the point. Her phone's still on the nightstand where she'd plugged it in last night, the cable stretching as she tossed and turned in bed. She'd spent most of the night with the bright screen blaring in her face, hidden beneath her duvet with a grin on her face, night mode activated but the constant message alerts keeping her awake well into the early hours of the morning.

It's probably not healthy to delay sleep just so you can reply to a message that's still gonna be there when you wake up, but she hadn't been able to help herself.

He'd been going through some stuff last night, and she knows that even if he hadn't of told her, she would have figured it out by the background noises of his voice memo. It'd been too late for him to actually call her, to really vent the way she knew he needed to — her dad was a light sleeper, and El's voice tended to be louder than usual whenever she spoke on the phone.

So, instead they'd opted for text messaging. It wasn't her favorite means of communication, but it definitely served its purpose when she wanted to talk to him and voice calls were out of the question.

It had started off as a simple enough conversation. El had lent him an ear — or a hand, rather — and he'd voiced all of his concerns: school, his future, his parents' marriage that was heading toward doomsville, and them.

She'd played the role of the good girlfriend: reading, re-reading, replying with everything he could ever want to hear read. She likes helping him, comforting him. They've known each other for years, and she likes to think she knows him like the back of her hand.

She'd been halfway through thinking of something funny to tell him, something cute to distract him with, when her own phone had buzzed, signalling an incoming text.

God, I want to see you right now.

She'd sent him a picture in response, a week-old black and white selfie that she'd cropped her step-brother out of. El had blushed, typed a short ***This should hold you over***, before hitting send.

And then...

Can I hold you instead?

A pause, then,

Or kiss you. Both work for me.

El hadn't been able to stop herself from giggling (bashfully, to herself) at that, and she'd flipped over in bed to lie on her back, neck pressing into her pillows with a satisfied sigh. ***Dream of it, then.***

Of kissing you?

Gulp. ***Whatever you want.***

He'd taken longer to reply after that, long enough to make El think that maybe he'd fallen asleep. But his response came two minutes later, ***I can't wait until tomorrow...*** and she'd smiled herself to sleep after sending her reply.

Throwing open her bedroom door now, and quickly unplugging her phone from its charger, El tries to push the message to the back of her mind. It doesn't budge, and El is reminded that even though she's going to see him today — probably wearing her favorite knit because it's a Tuesday and Tuesdays are 'sweater days' in his household — things won't go the way she wants them to.

She won't get to hold his hand, and she won't be able to kiss him whenever she wants. They agreed some time ago, back when they were still trying to figure out what they were to one another, that they'd keep their relationship hidden at school.

It's not even like they run in separate social circles — they have the same close knit group of friends, the same feelings of indifference towards the more 'popular' kids, and more than half of the same classes.

(She just doesn't wanna ruin it.)

"Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed or something?"

She's barely made it down the stairs for breakfast and already there's two sets of eyes on her.

Will, her step-brother with the hipster bowlcut and a weak almost-prepubescent moustache, is the one who asked the question. He's sat at the far end of the dining table, a fork in one hand — a crisp, burnt, heavily salted piece of bacon hanging off of it — and his phone in the other. He's not even looking at El though. No, instead his attention is solely set on his phone screen, and his eyes are shifting from left to right with a quickness that makes El think he's just pretending to read.

El can't help but pull a face, dropping her backpack down into one of the chairs as she pulls another out.

Okay, so she's not exactly dressed the way most seventeen year old girls do. Her brown corduroy overalls are a size too big, and the side buttons are kind of loose from where she fastens them up too quickly. One strap is pulled tighter than the other, but she's fine with it because her right breast is a tad bigger than her left so she thinks it evens her out, gives her some strange sense of balance. And, because her straps are differing, the long-sleeved coral-colored top she's wearing as a base is nicely *tight* on her frame, though the way it's tucked into the bottoms is sort of *off*.

And, sure, her socks are pulled up to mismatching heights — one to her ankle and one midway up her left calf — but at least they *match*. They're cream with stripes of red around the tops, (accidentally?) matching the rubber lining of her scuffed-up were-once-white high-tops. Her hair, still just passed shoulder-length and wavy no matter how many products she applies to try and straighten it out, is pulled into two low pigtails with uneven pieces of ribbon, long fringe

curling around her eyebrows and framing her face.

Just because she *looks* off doesn't mean she's actually off her game, she thinks with a frown.

(What the hell is Will even talking about? She's fine!)

(She was just up half the night texting him, is all. Maybe she can blame her fatigue on the dozens of heart emojis exchanged within a matter of minutes...)

El plops onto the cushioned stool at the head of the table, elbows resting on the worn edge. She pouts, just briefly, "Why do you ask?"

At that, her step-brother looks up, all wide-eyed and nonchalant. He shrugs, quickly going back to looking at his phone, "You're just usually down here before I am."

She can see her dad nodding out of the corner of her eye; he's sat beside Will with yesterday's Hawkins Post held up in front of his face.

Jim Hopper, local chief of police chief and (step-)father of three, is the literal worst — but not in a bad way, mind. He's got a buttered piece of toast hanging from past his lips, crumbs and grease galore, and the hand that isn't holding up the corner of his paper is scratching at his beard.

"I didn't sleep much." El says then, and she hopes that nobody notices the way her voices hitches, almost catches. Suddenly, and before she can scan the room, her stepmom's emerging from the kitchen, towel over her shoulder and Post-It name tag barely sticking to the front pocket of her shirt as she slides a plate of red apple slices in front of the teen.

She mumbles something below her breath, and then she's wrapping an arm around El's shoulders, "Are you feeling alright, sweetie?" The woman frowns, and her thin brows dip into the top of her nose. "I hope you're not coming down with anything."

Joyce Byers is something of a worrier. She's kind, pleasant, easy on the eyes. Her hairs are greying at the roots, and her mouth is cornered with aged parentheses. But her eyes are still bright and

youthful, and while her voice is groggy from years of smoking cigarettes of the stronger breed, she's far from being past her prime.

El thinks it's cute how she and Hopper had known each other in their youth. They'd 'dated' — or something akin to — back in high school, before adulthood and *adulthood* had taken over and they'd settled down, grown up, and started their respective families.

Joyce had married her actual high school sweetheart, her sons' biological dad, sometime shortly after graduation. Rumor was that she'd gotten knocked up over finals and Lonnie Byers had seen no other option than to 'marry the poor girl'. Joyce had never confirmed nor denied the story, but El thinks that she's still young enough to have had her first child at around nineteen.

They'd had Jonathan — El's other step-brother who's off in New York, a freelance photographer of his own making — right after the wedding, and some three years later Will Byers had been born into Hawkins. It wasn't long after their youngest's third birthday that things started to go awry.

Lonnie started showing up late for work, or he avoided work all together. He blamed it on his family, told people how stressed out he was now that he had two kids and a mortgage that was never gonna be paid off. He didn't come home some nights, and his idea of lending his wife a hand was to offer her sex or suggest they hire a cheap babysitter to look after their 'brats'. But the final straw came when he took to giving his eldest son semi-weekly beatings because he refused to, quote, 'hit a measly woman' and he needed a punching bag. Joyce hadn't been so *measly* when she'd packed a bag full of his belongings, changed the locks on the doors and quite literally *shoved* him out of the house. He hasn't been seen in town since. It was fourteen years ago.

Hopper and his story were something else entirely. He'd skipped town right after high school graduation and, up until the moment he came back to Hawkins with an eleven year old daughter, nobody really knew what happened during those fateful years. El does though, at least to some extent.

Jim Hopper had met his first wife, now some swanky real estate

agent named Diane, in Chicago. They'd gotten married fairly quickly. But within that first year of marriage, they'd suffered a miscarriage and a burglary, and Hopper had resorted to booze and prescription pain meds to deal with his wife's pain. Diane hadn't been communicative for much of the rest of that year, choosing to work instead of talk and, when it had become clear that their relationship was beyond repair — and that Hopper had started sleeping with some other woman on the sly — Diane had filed for divorce and cited 'irreconcilable differences'.

The other woman just so happened to be El's own mother. Terry Ives, once a bartender and now a body resting in the ground, had once been something of a comfort blanket to Hopper. She'd served him, serviced him, and then showed on his doorstep with a positive pregnancy test and a cheap bottle of vodka.

El doesn't really know much about the rest of *that* story; Hopper tends to blur out additional details every time he retells the tale, but she knows that her dad had at least *liked* the woman, and he only has nice things to say about her.

Terry Ives had died in childbirth, after suffering some kind of internal bleed, a hemorrhage El couldn't explain if her own life depended on it. She'd previously suggested they call the baby Jane, after her grandmother, and Hopper hadn't seen fit to give the baby girl any other name after her mother's death. It was only fitting that she retain some part of her, even if she never got the chance to meet her, know her.

(Hop says she looks like her sometimes; under a certain light, her nose and eyes... El thinks he's just humoring himself because she's seen pictures of Terry Ives and she doesn't see it: the resemblance, the cause of the smile on her dad's face when he's recounting a memory El never never lived.)

Jane Eleanor Ives Hopper is her name, but she goes by El to those who know her best, those who love her.

One of those people being Joyce. She and Hopper had started (secretly) dating some years back, back when El and Will were still in the midst of early adolescence and their parents thought they were

being smart by hiding their relationship.

(And they'd done it, too; managed to keep their newfound romance a secret for a few months. Well, right up until Steve Harrington — once a glorified high school stud with a reputation and now a hotshot deputy sheriff who liked to flash his badge — had found them making out in the alley behind a bar downtown. And he'd told Dustin... who told Lucas... who told Mike... who had been ambushed and forced into telling El and Will.)

Joyce Byers is total sweetheart, and El loves her. But, right now the woman has a hand pressed up against El's forehead and she's humming and *tut*'ing, and the girl just physically *cannot*.

Gently wrapping her hand around Joyce's wrist to pull the woman off of her, El furrows her brows, "I'm fine." She waits until Joyce is crossing over her arms over her chest, almost disbelievingly, before continuing, "Really. I was just up late." She tries for a smile, crooked and sheepish, "I'm fine, I promise."

Her hands drop to her lap then, and she pulls on the hem of her short overalls, a loose thread in the corduroy catching her attention. El yanks on the stray thread, wrapping it around her finger so as to pull it from its place. But it doesn't tear, instead just riding up the leg of her shorts, widening the rip.

"Shit."

Her dad clears his throat at that, and he licks the tips of his fingers before turning the page of his newspaper, shooting her a glance over the top of the page. Hopper shakes his head, eyes rolling. El forces a smile.

"Why were you up late, El?" Will reaches across the table for a piece of apple then, plucking one from the plate with a click of his tongue. He stares at his sister with a blank expression, but she can *read* him.

Damn him and that stupid buttoned-up-to-his-Adam's-apple shirt and the parka she knows he's gonna slip on as soon as they leave the house. El kind of misses the days when he wasn't so involved with the art kids, so *dressy*. Granted, he's always been gifted and it made total

sense that he spend time with others like him; the weirdos who graffiti dumpsters and decorate bland bathroom stalls with pretty, nitty, gritty artwork and anonymously-sourced quotes from the web.

The so-called 'art freaks' of Hawkins High were 90's grunge addicts who preferred ripped jeans to chinos, and Will himself had always — at least as long as El has known him — had a preference for plaid shirts with holes in the cuffs. But then one day he'd befriended another creative type: Brett. Six-foot-two, stylish as all hell, and a total throwback dreamboat. He kept his (blonde, almost brown) hair in check, always seemed to have some kind glitter and/or Sharpie on his hands, and he was the kind of senior who joined yearbook committee just for *fun*. That didn't mean he was popular though. He just tended to float back and forth between cliques, making friendly with the preps and the potheads and the rest of the student body.

Will hasn't confirmed it yet, but El's pretty sure they're dating. Or, at the very least, they're close to dating. There's a reason Brett always spends longer hugging Will than he does anybody else. And there's a reason her stepbrother blushes whenever the guys in close-proximity.

Coming back to reality, El blinks. "No particular reason." She plays it cool, nonchalant, and she slouches back in her seat, reaching for a slice of fruit. It's sour to the taste, and the juice slides down her chin. She wipes it away with the pad of her thumb, mock-scowling in Will's direction.

The corners of his mouth purse, and he turns to face his stepdad with a knowing look in his eye. Will whispers, holding up a hand as though it'll mask his words from her view, "I think she was sexting."

"Sex-" Hopper's paper is lowered then, and his eyes are bullets aiming straight for El's forehead. "What's sexting?"

El's lips part in surprise, and she can't help the small gasp that escapes at Will's insinuation, "*Not* what I was doing."

"It's texting," Will explains, nodding, "but sexier."

"Shut up!" El picks up another piece of apple then, and she launches it across the table, straight at Will's face. It misses though, and the

slice of fruit lands on the wooden floor with a gentle 'plop'. Joyce just mutters something before heading back into the kitchen. Hopper's still staring. Will's proud of himself and El is out for blood.

(Will knows, and it's totally fine that he knows, but he promised that he wouldn't tell.)

"Who were you sexy texting?"

Groaning, El's head slips even lower until her forehead connects with the hard table, and she curses below her breath, cheeks flushing in partial embarrassment. "Can you *not* say that ever again, please? Oh, my God."

"Fine," her dad huffs, "Who do I need to threaten?"

"No one!" Suddenly, she's lifting her head, sliding her forearms along the old oak until her hands are cupping her cheeks. She mumbles through gritted teeth, eyes zeroing in on her brother's shit-eating grin. "Nobody. I wasn't sexting anybody."

"Should I believe you?"

"I don't know. *Should* you be asking me that, as a parent?" The brunette quips, "You tell me."

"Let's say I believe you," the chief starts, and he runs a finger along his beard, pinching its length as his eyes narrow, shifting back and forth between the two teens, "I'm not gonna find some wannabe Romeo climbing up my drainpipe trying to get into your room at two in the morning, am I?"

"No."

"You swear?"

"Promise."

"Will?" Hopper eyes the boy then, tilting his head as he picks the Post past up from off of the table. He flips it open to resume his reading, moustache almost curling in consideration. "Should I believe her?"

"I don't see why not," Will reasons, and he's anything but gleeful now. He *knows* El's gonna have him for this. "She's not exactly hot property."

"Say what now?"

The newspaper's lowered again.

"You promised you wouldn't tell!"

Will grimaces, stroking his bicep when she's just smacked him. It doesn't hurt, not really. His lips pop as he parts them to reply, "And I didn't!" he sighs, "I was just trying to speed the process along."

"By telling dad?"

"By telling someone!" Will argues back.

(He can only keep a secret for so long. And it's proving to be ever-difficult when his friends don't even try that hard to keep it themselves.)

Beside him, El just folds her arms over her chest, and her shoulders raise as they make their way through the front entrance of the school. The main hallway is packed with loud, speed-walking, nervous kids, and there's a group of cheerleaders congregated by the water fountain, giggling and gossiping and gushing over Troy Harrington, captain of the football team. He's totally living his cousin's shadow; trying to be the player, the playboy and the charmer all at once. It's just a shame he lacks Steve's charisma.

Even though they're cousins, El fails to see any similarities between the two. Where Steve Harrington, grown adult that he is now, is mostly kind and a total lady's man, his younger cousin isn't so fortunate. Troy's idea of flirting is tapping a poor girl's ass and *telling* them to call him. El knows this because, while she herself hasn't yet had the misfortune of interacting with the jock in such a manor, her best friend has had to deal with him on a number of occasions... that was until he'd pinched her ass for third time and she'd punched him square in the jaw.

At the memory, El grins to herself, head ducking as she finally stops in

front of her locker. A good third of the football team are only a few feet away, and when her locker's flung open and she's rifling through her books for the morning, El can feel a pair of eyes on her. They're not Will's; he's leaning up against the locker next to her's, rambling on about a history test he has in the afternoon. And they aren't *his* — she knows this because his car wasn't parked out front, nor was the bike he sometimes opts to use instead, and she would just know if it was him.

So, turning her head and pretending to listen to her brother's rant, El watches in shock, eyebrows quirking, as one of them of the players winks at her.

The self-professed right-hand-man of the team captain, James Parker. He's got an arm bent crooked, jacket-clas elbow resting against the poster-splattered memo board with a smirk on his face. She's not ignorant to the way he scans her up and down, eyes stopping on her legs and running his tongue over his lisp.

El scowls, shudders.

(Literally, what the fu-)

"El!"

There's a pair of hands clamping down on her shoulders then, applying pressure on her petite frame. Her best friend, Max Mayfield, is stood behind her with a wide smile on her face and a joyfulness to her voice.

(She hasn't looked this happy since she punched Troy and everyone cheered her on.)

"I need to talk to you." Max tells her, and El finally breaks all eye contact with the jock so she can face her friend then. Max's hands lift off of the brunette, and she runs them through her own red locks. She's wearing her hair down today, but there's a scrunchie on her wrist that El knows she'll use if her boyfriend pulls her away to make out during lunch. It's navy and littered with stars, and El can't help but think of *his* freckles.

"You guys didn't break up again, did you?" It's Will that asks the question, and Max turns to him with an eye roll.

Her blue eyes widen then, all bright and *content*, "Would I look this happy if we did?" She raises her shoulders to reiterate her point, shrugging. "No, but seriously, we need to talk later." Max eyes the other girl now, "Make time for me at lunch."

El smiles, nodding, "Okay. I'll try and work you into my schedule." She jokes, snorting at herself.

"You know what I mean." Max just wiggles her brows suggestively, and she pulls at the scrunchie on her wrist, letting it snap back into place with a final breath.

The somber blue matches the frayed, ripped jeans she's got on. Her ivory knees, bare beneath the denim, contrast with the cropped black hoodie she's wearing under her yellow parka, and the whites ankle socks she's wearing with her Vans are practically shredding at the tops. "I've gotta run." Max lays a hand on El's arm, softer this time, "I'll see you later?"

Nodding, the brunette just smiles, ever eager to please. "Yeah." Her smile broadens, teeth-baring, and then her best friend is whipping back around, a skip in her step, and heading down whence she came.

"What do you think she wants to talk to you about?" Will voices, and he nudges El's side with a curious look on his face.

Pulling a couple of books from her locker, and spending just a moment longer staring at the stickers and photos she's adorned the interior with, El slams the metal door shut with a shrug. She licks her lips, seeking moisture before continuing, "I have no idea." She back into the main walkway then, waiting for her brother to catch up before starting off.

Will quickly pushes up from the locker, and he adjusts the strap of his overstuffed satchel as he skids along the tiles to reach her. "Maybe she *told*."

"She would never." El eyes him then, a teasing smirk on her lips,

"Max would never betray me like that."

"You're being really dramatic, you know." Will tells her, shaking his head dismissively. "Nobody's gonna care you're dating a nerd."

(And she knows what he means — it's not like she's popular or anything. Really, who would care if she started holding his hand and letting him kiss her in the hallway? Why would anyone give a crap if two people, who don't rank higher than a grade three on the high school food chain, came out with their relationship? Literally nobody.)

"That's not the point." El counters back, and she looks up from the ground to find them arriving in front of homeroom. "Everybody is in everybody's business at this school." She pulls her books tight against her chest then, voice lowering as she whispers, "I just don't want everybody in my business."

"El... and I say this as nicely as I possibly can," Will starts, lifting a hand to the crook of her arm to stop her in her tracks. He glances around at first, eyeing the multitude of students around them. Nobody seems bored or to pay them any mind, so he continues, "There are more interesting things going on at this school than your love life." Will pauses, and he tugs at the fringe falling in his face then, forehead creasing as he adds as an afterthought, "Than any of our love lives."

There's a awkward silence, filled only with raucous coming from inside the classroom and El's laboured breathing. "Still," she says after a beat, hazel eyes amber as she breathes, "It's *my* relationship."

"OK." Her step-brother holds up his hands defensively, seemingly backing off. Will smiles, kind and understanding again, "I'm sorry."

El sighs in content then, and she plucks his phone from his front pocket when it looks like it's going to fall. She passes it to him, blinks, "I'm sorry, too."

Will's eyebrows raise up almost to his hairline. He peers down at her, at a total loss, "Wait, what are you apologizing for?"

The girl simply bats her eyelashes, an innocent smile on her face as a

smirk forms, "For letting you leave the house in that outfit."

Max skipped out on lunch after all, which meant that El had been left alone with Dustin and Will for the second time that week.

Mike was off fixing something for a sub teacher, and he'd been more than happy to spend his break indoors. He'd claimed to have developed a chill in his back from an outdoor swim meet last weekend, but El was smart enough to now he'd been lying; he just wasn't up for playing another round of twenty questions with Will.

Lucas had rushed over to their usual table, shirt untucked from his jeans and belt halfway undone, and he'd offered a simple, "I've gotta head home and collect something. See you later." Claiming forgetfulness would only have worked if Will hadn't seen him — and Max! — in his car some ten minutes later, a sneaker sole pressed up against the passenger side window and the radio blasting.

Lunch eaten, El and the two remaining boys had decided to spend the rest of their time out on the outdoor bleachers. The track had been mostly empty during break, aside from a few strays either practicing or working out, so they'd spent the last ten minutes taking shit about Stacey and her goons. But then lunch period ended, Will had to rush off to class, and so El was sat alone with Dustin watching as the cheer squad rehearsed out in the open, Stacey and co right in the middle of a patchy spot of grass.

It's only when the cheer captain herself is on top of the pyramid, arms flying into the air, that Dustin turns to her and breaks the silence.

"Awesome." He huffs out, chest heaving just once as he leans back against the top bleacher, pressing up on bent forearms, "What does that even mean?"

El's gaze narrows in on the boy then, taking in his unruly head of hair and the dazed look on his face. "Is that serious question, or—"

"Yes. Yes, it's serious." Dustin confirms. He shakes his head, eyes shifting from the group of girls on the field to his girl friend.

"Awesome." He speaks the word, deliberately separating the syllables to highlight his point, "Like, what, it inspires some awe but not a whole lot?"

He turns around before she can answer him then, head resting back against El's crossed legs, her bare knee cap pressing into the back of his head.

"Such bullshit." The boy mutters, mostly to himself.

El still doesn't know what to say to him, to answer, so she settles for patting his head amicably and smiling down at him. After a beat, she says, "I think you're awe*plenty*."

Dustin snorts at that, but she knows he doesn't mean it in a cruel fashion. He simply flashes her his best smile — now that his teeth have properly come in and he's at ease with grinning. "Thanks, El."

He kicks his legs out in front of him then, stretching out on the bench as he settles in next to his friend. His hand clasp over his abdomen thoughtfully as though he's plotting something masterful. His bright yellow hoodie is hanging open at the sides, almost flapping over onto the seat below, and the white t-shirt he'd been wearing beneath it has a pizza stain on the pocket. El grins, poking him in the forehead. Dustin bats her hand away with a chuckle and a 'hey!'.

"There you are!"

Suddenly, El's gaze is pulled away from the boy practically curled up into her side to the one quickly making his way up the bleachers. He takes long strides, rubber soles squeaking as he makes to straddle the bench below the pair. Mike pulls the overhanging part of Dustin's hoodie into his lap, toying with the zipper in his fingers.

"I've been looking everywhere for you."

It's directed at El more than anything and she knows it.

"Well, congratulations, Wheeler. You finally found us." Dustin holds up a hand for Mike to high-five in triumph. The taller boy just rolls his eyes and complies.

Daring a look at her boyfriend's face, El's breath catches in her throat. Jesus, he's *cute*. Tuesday didn't fail her, and he's totally wearing that sweater. It's cream with rows of green and it's marvelously, perfectly wonderful, El reflects. He got it as a gift from his aunt last Christmas, when he was down in Florida with the rest of his immediate family.

El only knows this because one day they'd been hanging out in his basement, with Mike helping her write an English paper. Wanting to get a little *closer* to him, she'd said something about feeling cold, hoping maybe he'd offer her a hug or more. But instead, he'd lent her the knit thrown over the arm of the sofa. He'd been wearing it all day so it definitely *smelled* of him and, naturally, she wasn't opposed to the idea.

(It's totally her favorite sweater now.)

He's wearing dark grey jeans that perfectly contrast with the lighter brown tone of her own dungarees, and his black Chuck Taylors look like they've seen better days. He slides his hands so casually in his back pockets as he sits that his shoulders hunch forward and El just wants to *touch* him, right where an inch of his neck is exposed.

The collar of the green shirt is pulled up, lazily tucking over the neckline of his sweater. El kind of wants to reach out and straighten it. But she refrains, instead choosing to keep her hands in her lap, fidgeting as she looks him over, staring.

Mike Wheeler isn't the most conventionally attractive person. He's tall and lanky, beanpole-like in a way that teenage girls generally don't want. He's got brown eyes, dark hair that desperately needs brushing and pale skin; meaning he's naturally emo-looking without actually being withdrawn from society. He's all sharp cheekbones and plump rose lips, long nose, and freckles aplenty.

(She thinks he's perfect. For her, at least.)

Mike cocks his head to the side then, fingertips slipping past his hairline as he turns to face the petite girl across from him, seemingly oblivious to her daydreaming.

"Hi." He says, and El is *putty*.

She tries to stop the corners of her lips from curling up and forming a sly, shy smile. But her efforts prove futile, and she's blushing under his gaze with cherry blossom tinted cheeks. Suddenly their conversation from last night is brought back to the forefront of her brain and she's imagining kissing him, holding him.

(Whatever you want.)

It's stupid, really. She could if she wanted to, and she can... she just doesn't want to fuel a rumor mill that survives on 'who's who' and 'who's doing who', and for word-of-mouth around the senior student body to be 'those two AV nerds were getting hot and heavy at during free period'.

"Hi." The brunette licks her lips, hands smoothing down her thighs, pulling on that same loose thread of corduroy she'd plucked at this morning. She can feel him staring, watching, and she swallows down a loaded breath. "Are we still-"

"Yeah." Mike nods, not even letting her finish her sentence. Mike reaches down for her hand, running his thumb along her knuckles softly. Their hands are in her lap so it's not like anybody can see them from so far away and Dustin already knows, but *still*. "If you want."

(Of course she wants to. School night or not, the idea of spending her evening in an old car park with Mike, making out, hanging out, with the radio turned down quiet enough so they can hear their own breathing is too tempting to pass up.)

El withdraws her hand after a moment, but she doesn't shove him away. Her fingertips tap along his wrist, his palm facing up. Mike watches in amusement as her fingers dance up and down his arm, only stopping when she nears his watch. Her index finger lingers over the small screen, hovering in the air.

El looks up at him then. Her brows dip and her lashes flutter flirtatiously, "Tonight?"

The boy only smiles, and he nods again with a touch to her elbow, arm sliding back against his ribcage. The lines around Mike's mouth arch, curve around lips that El is desperately longing to touch, kiss.

She so would if Stacey and her minions weren't so close, if the cheerleaders weren't known for their eagle eyes and rumor mill spinning.

Mike is turned back toward Dustin then, and he frowns, "What are you doing?"

"Getting more action with your girlfriend on school grounds than you ever will," comes Dustin's witty reply, and Mike just sighs.

The boy keeps his eyes locked on his friend's face then, despite the fact that the curly-haired boy can't even see him because his own eyes are closed. "Funny."

Dustin smirks, and one clear blue eye winks open to shoot Mike a smug look, "Wasn't a joke."

"Hey, I forgot to ask earlier," Max starts, and she pulls the hem of her t-shirt free from the cup of her bra then, tugging the stripy black material down to her navel. It softly sticks to her body, damp from the shower water she'd managed to flick onto it while drying off.

Having caught up while they were sidelined during a game of softball during last period, Max had filled El in on what had her so happy this morning. Apparently, her mom and step-father had *finally* filed for divorce, which meant he'd be moving out and Max could go back to living a peaceful life.

Her stepdad, and the son who'd once also lived with them, had come to Hawkins some years back with Max and her mom. The details are a little blurry, but El knows Neil Hargrove hadn't ever been the most pleasant of stepdads towards her friend. Often, Max would stay over at the Byers-Hopper household for fear of 'waking the dragon', as she put it.

"Did you wanna come to The Hawk tonight? Lucas and I are gonna catch that new foreign film."

"Just me and you and your boyfriend?" El asks, and her nose crinkles as she moves to straddle the bench then, reaching down to retrieve

her pumps. "Wait- foreign film? Yeah, no. I definitely don't wanna third wheel your planned makeout."

"What are you talking about, you know I love French movies." Max snickers, not even trying to lie.

"Didn't you get enough at lunch? You know you can get diseases if you suck face too much."

"Please, that's like an urban legend of something." Max waves it off.

El quirks a brow, and she pulls on the laces of her first shoe, her wrist curling as she yanks them loose, "Anyway, I think I'll pass."

Rolling her eyes, the redhead leans against her locker, elbow digging into the metal door as her hip pops. "Well, what are you gonna do all night? Watch Netflix with Will and your eleven imaginary cats?" Max raises both brows, eyeing her friend. "Play charades with the chief?" She tugs at the waistband of her jeans, hopping as she readjusts the zipper.

"I have... plans." El shrugs, and suddenly she's ducking her gaze. "With you-know-who."

"Hot plans?"

"*Waffle* plans."

Max smirks, and she rests a hand on her hip then, "Sounds sexy."

"Oh, it will be." The brunette grins. From her spot, El only smiles up at her friend, and she slips a sock-clad foot into her shoe with ease, "There's gonna be syrup and everything." She jokes, snorting, and she tugs at the sock around her Achilles.

Max picks up her backpack off of the floor, swiping her phone from the side pocket with a grin. "I'm so *not* jealous right now." She unlocks her phone with one hand, the other making to retrieve the screwed up parka from off of the bench beside El, just as the brunette's phone lights up with a incoming, unread message flashing across the screen.

Max's grin widens then, and she snorts, "Hurry up with that." She nods down toward the phone, wagging a finger, and she gives El a moment to lace-up her second shoe and pick up the glowing device before she says, "You promised me ice cream before we split."

"What are you, five?"

"No. But I'm broke." The redhead slips her jacket over one shoulder, and she rubs the balls of her hands together impatiently. "Come on. You can reply to that later. A girl's gotta eat."

"Energy?"

Max wiggles her brows, "Stamina." She teases, a finger jabbing El in the arm, "And, hey, you know if Mike's car gets too cramped, you can always join us. Though, trust me, I don't anybody ever cleans those back rows."

El shakes her head and she shoos Max out of the doorway with a flick of her hand, unable to help the giddy smile that's threatening to take over her whole face. The redhead only whines, loud and exaggerated, and she leaves the brunette seemingly alone on the bench, half-dressed and half-alert to the world around her.

Unlocking the phone in her hand, El finally pulls up her messages. Her cheeks flutter pink as she reads the new text. She lets the once-looming smile spread across her face as she reads it over, twice for good measure, three times just for fun.

I adore you a waffle lot, Jane Eleanor Ives Hopper.

She's one hundred percent, totally, definitely, unashamedly in love with this idiot.

She sends back a bunch of emojis, her fingers gliding so quickly over the keypad that she almost sends him an eggplant. She deletes that last one, lips pursing as she opts instead for the kissy face.

Satisfied and maybe a tad hungrier than she'd first thought, El places her phone back down on a dry patch of the bench, tucked in beneath the folded up sleeves of her jacket, and she continues getting dressed in a hurry.

By the time she finally makes it out of the door, the flap of her overalls is still hanging open, the bright top beneath them has been hurriedly tucked in, but at least her socks are evenly pulled up this time.

She shoves her belongings back inside her gym locker, forcing the door shut with a groan and a knock of her knee that'll probably leave a bruise later. She grabs her backpack, her old denim jacket, and heads for the exit.

It's just a shame she forgets her phone lying face-down on the bench — still unlocked, the screen reflecting against the varnished wood... It's practically *begging* to be picked up and read.

So, when a cheerleader comes bounding around the corner some five minutes later — high ponytail in full swing, lips pressing together as she hums some Top 40 pop song below her breath — who's fault is it really when she picks it up?

"Those were the best damn waffles I've ever tasted."

"Better than my mom's?" Mike turns to face the girl, eyebrows raising in amusement. He feigns a gasp when she nods in answer, licking her lips. "I'm offended."

El giggles, and she leans back against the upholstery. She unfolds her legs on the back seat, kicking off her canvas pumps until they drop onto the floor. Wiggling her toes, she continues, "Don't get me wrong, your mom is a great cook," she starts, watching as Mike crumbles up the paper bag in his hands. "I just prefer Waffle House."

With a shake of his head, Mike stuffs the bag into the back of the driver seat. He pinches his nose as he squints, "Um, you know this is treason." He tells her, "Right?"

"What?" The brunette squeaks, wide-eyed. "How is this treason? It's not like I'm insulting *your* culinary skills."

"No, you're just insulting my mom's." Mike snickers and he shuffles closer to her on the backseat. His shoulder presses into her arm as he

slides down, popping upon the button of his jeans. "That's even worse."

"How is that worse?" El asks, and she tosses her head back for all of maybe three seconds until her attention snaps back onto Mike's face when she hears — and then sees — him unzip his pants. "Mike, what are you doing?"

He looks up at her then, and if that look in his eye came from anybody else El would feel under attack. Instead, it just makes her feel warm, heated — and then he *smiles*. "I'm getting changed."

Frowning, the girl simply watches as he slides his jeans down his legs, kicking off his shoes to pull them off completely. "And what exactly are you changing into?" She gasps, "Is this where you turn into a werewolf and eat me alive? It is past midnight." She places her hand on his shoulder to steady him when he slips from the seat, pant legs still around his ankles.

El giggles, unable to help herself from laughing. Her nose crinkles adorably as she tries to pull him back up. He's all limbs though, and she gives up fairly quickly; instead leaving him on the floor of the car.

"I mean, I don't know about the werewolf bit," Mike starts, and he wiggles his brows suggestively, a soft shade of pink tinting his cheeks. El reaches forward, cupping his face between her hands. His jaw presses into her palms, and the girl has quite literally yank him up to her level in order to kiss him.

"You're such a nerd." She presses her lips against his then, tantalisingly slow and soft, until Mike coaxes her mouth open with his tongue. El trails her hands down his neck, smoothing along his shoulders until she can get a full grasp on his sweater, pulling the thick material into her hands with need, hunger. She weeps into the kiss, some kind of high-pitched moan that escapes when he nips at her bottom lip.

Well aware of the fact that he's basically no longer wearing any pants — and given up on wondering *why* even though she's pretty sure it has something to do with him spending the night at Lucas' — El shifts

back on the seat until she's lying flat. She arches her back as her legs bend, knees digging into Mike's ribcage as he moves to kneel between her legs.

"I wasn't aware you were offering." He whispers, almost huskily as his voice dips, and she knows what he's referring to.

"I'm not." El informs him, grabbing handfuls of his sweater until she can draw him up and on top of her. It's not comfortable — the way he's kind of hovering over her with his forearms pushing into the cushions and her legs wrapping around his torso — but it'll have to do for now. "This would so much easier in a *room*."

Mike cackles at that, and he drops his head to her chest, nose tickling the cleavage when her overalls are open, bra straps on full display. He plucks at the lacy top, eyes darkening, "I don't think your dad would like me stopping by at this hour."

El hums, something of an agreement, and then she says, "But I would."

"Do I need to send you better texts? Because I can." Mike suggests, and his hair falls against her neck again, making her skin erupt in goosebumps. "I can do that. I can be *libidinous*."

"Libidinous?" El's breath halts as she inhales deeply, feeling his lips against her naked collarbone, long fingers clawing at her bra straps. Her legs tighten around his waist, drawing him closer, "I don't know what that means but I like how it sounds." She rasps, no longer even trying to hide the need in her voice.

"Um," the boy looks up at her then, and it takes her a moment to take *him* in. Her breathing is ragged now, sped up by the way his hands keep delicately grazing her body and his mouth keeps kissing her as though she's made of porcelain, "Carnal?"

"That sounds like fun."

"Lascivious."

"I don't believe that's a word." She denies, shaking her pigtails free with a quick flick of her hand. She feels Mike's mouth dance across

her shoulder then, "Use it in a sentence."

"He looked at her with a lascivious look in his eye."

"So it's code for horny?"

Mike grins, she can *feel* it. He presses a fleeting kiss on her chin, eyes closed. "Two guesses as to who I'm talking about."

"I don't need two guesses. I can *tell*."

"Oh." Mike glances down, and then up. "Gotcha."

El's face just scrunches in amusement, "Orgiastic."

"Okay, no," Mike pushes up on his hands then, and he shakes his head, "that was a mood killer." He plops down onto the floor of the car, leaning back on his elbows. "Jesus."

"Orgiastic was a mood killer but lascivious wasn't?"

"I'm trying to teach you new words here."

"I'm trying to teach you new words here."

"I don't need to be taught new words, Mike." El informs him, pressing a socked foot into his shin, "You can teach me other things."

"Like?"

"I don't know," she pulls down a first strap then, eyeing her lap with pursed lips, "what was it that werewolves did again?" She drops the second strap, "Divulge?"

"Devour." He corrects her, absentmindedly pulling at the hem of his boxers. But then he glances back up, takes in her noticeable bare upper body, and the way his nostrils flare doesn't go unnoticed.

El sighs dreamily, tossing her head back, "That was it. See? I'm learning already."

It's not that he looks hopeful, but he also totally, *definitely* does. Pushing up onto his knees, Mike's hands slide up her thighs, and he

raises both brows in question. "Are you serious?"

"I'll give you two guesses."

This is not how her day was supposed to go.

When she got to school, she was supposed to just *find* her phone in the girls' locker room where she'd left it yesterday.

What she wasn't supposed to be doing was standing in the middle of a crowded hallway, right in the school entrance, staring at an array of colored flyers plastered on every wall — the words 'JANE ELEANOR IVES HOPPER loves...' written in big, bold, black letters across the top of every page.

But the worst part of it all isn't her name mass-printed all over the school. It's the images pasted below her name; screenshots of a text conversation between her and the contact she'd saved as 'Waffle Boy'.

(Never has she been more proud of herself for having concealed Mike's name.)

She's been standing there for four whole minutes when someone other than Will finally approaches her. They don't laugh, and they don't mock, but they extend an arm out and offer her one of the flyers.

El glances up then, and she recognises the girl as being on the cheer squad. Jennifer Hayes, right-hand to Stacey.

"You're so lucky." Jennifer says, and she tucks strawberry blonde hair back behind her ear with her free hand. "All the girls are jealous."

(Shit. Shit. Shit.)

Unflinching, El lets Will snatch the orange sheet of paper away from the girl. He clears his throat, eyes roaming over the photos slowly. El doesn't even want to know what's on there, which messages are on the orange pages. She's pretty sure the screenshotted texts vary depending on the color paper.

The fact that someone went through so much hassle is just... like... who... why?

"El." Max's voice calls out to her from down the hallway, way past all the colors and stares, and she draws her name out so slowly and lovingly that El almost wants to collapse in her arms. The redhead finally reaches her side then, and she doesn't waste a second before throwing her arms around the girl, pulling her close, "I'm gonna kill them."

"Not if I do it first." Will says as he scans the hallway, clutching the strap of his bag. There's a whole stack of rose pink flyers on a shelf in the trophy cabinet, and Will watches with baited breath as students swipe them up on their way past. "This can't be *legal*."

Max smooths a hand down the girl's hair, threading her fingers through her low pigtails. She pulls away then, cupping El's face between her hands. The brunette only stares up at her in silence, eyes glazing over. She doesn't want to cry, to show herself weaker than she *is* — but someone actually went through all of this just to, what, humiliate her?

"You're stronger than this." Her best friend tells her, nodding her head reassuringly. El forces a smile onto her face, and she rests her hands over Max's, gulping down a loaded breath.

"I can do this." El says finally, and she licks her lips, "I can handle it."

"Exactly." The other girl raises both eyebrows, nose twitching, "You're gonna walk down that hallway, ignore everyone," she waves a hand about the place, gesturing, "and you're gonna let them know that you don't give a shit."

"I *do* give a shit, though."

Max mumbles, "Don't let them know that." She blinks, smiles through gritted teeth, "You're the *chief's* daughter. You're *my* best friend. You've got M-" she pauses, unsure if she should bring him into this when he's yet to be named and shamed.

Will cuts in then, laying a hand on her back, "Us. You've got us."

El nods, "Right."

"Walk down the hallway." Max pushes on her shoulders, walking behind her. She shuffles her backpack further up her arm, urging El forward, "Straight ahead to your locker."

"Collect 200 when you pass Go." Will quips, and he's halfway to a chuckle when Max elbows him in the ribs. "Geez, sorry."

There's a pregnant pause as she walks over to her locker, almost like nobody wants to say or do anything. El can feel most of everyone's eyes on her, either trying to assess her mood or gauge a reaction out of her.

There's a yellow flyer duct taped to the front of her locker door, and her cell phone is sealed in a baggy hanging from the tape.

It's taunting her, reminding her that she left it unsupervised — almost like when you accidentally step on your dog's paw and they give you *that* look.

With a heavy chest, El rips the tape off of her locker. She quickly unlocks the latch and scrunches the pink paper up in her fist to throw it inside. Reaching into the baggy, she slides her phone out of the bag with a sigh, lips drying as the air around her thickens.

Sensing a presence next to her, El looks up to find Stacey pressed up against the next locker. The girl is about a half-foot taller than El, with slick brown hair and pretty green eyes. She smiles down at the girl, lashes fluttering almost condescendingly. She crosses her legs at the knees, kicking them out straight as her sneakers squeak.

"We're not trying to bully you, you know." She says, and El is just about ready to pull her perfect hair out of her head. "We're just curious."

"About what?"

"How you scored such a hottie."

El's eyes almost bulge out of her head then. "A *what*?"

Stacey just rolls her eyes and she presses a hand flat against the locker, eyeing El's phone. "I mean, he's gotta be, right. No one has that kinda game if they're ugly."

"You don't even know him."

"Well, no."

She gets it then, what Stacey and company are plotting.

"But you *want* to?" The petite girl quirks a brow, and she turns so her whole body is facing the cheer captain. "You want to find out who I'm dating?"

"Obviously."

El doesn't know *why*, and she doesn't understand how anybody could ever be so bored as to start a game of '*Guess Who?*'. Maybe the rumor mill has run dry, maybe there's no gossip to keep the high school food chain well fed.

"Who is it?" Stacey purses her lips, but there's something in her eyes that lets El she doesn't really care — she just wants to be in the know. "Is it Troy? He'd do anything to get with a freaky—"

With a smirk, El slams her locker shut. She doesn't need any books for her first class, and all she really wanted was her phone.

(All she really needs is Mike.)

"I guess you're gonna have to figure it out."

Jennifer's words come back to her then, and El whips back around to face her two closest friends. Will looks proud, Max looks ready to punch someone in the face again.

Behind them, she can see Mike off in the distance, just past the main entrance. Dustin and Lucas are behind him, oblivious as they bicker about something trivial. But Mike — his face says it all. He's seen the posters and he's seen what's on them, and he's staring straight at her with surprise clear on his face. His Adam's apple bobs and his brows dip between his eyes, unsure.

And so, before he can approach her, and before anybody can clock who she's looking at, El shakes her head. Her lips are pulled thin, her hazel eyes blown wide. Almost furiously, she continues to shake her head until he *gets* it.

(Don't comfort me. Don't hug me. Don't kiss me. Don't *tell* them.)

Mike just nods, and he breaks eye contact after a beat. When he does, Lucas wraps an arm around his shoulders and whispers something in his ear to which Mike shakes his head. His hands slip into his back pockets, and he bites his lower lip.

El reaches for Max's hand then, and she pulls the girl into a close embrace. She brushes her red hair out of the way as her eyes fall on her brother's face. He reads her lips as she whispers, "Don't tell anybody."

Will nods, and Max smiles once they've pulled away. She clutches El's arms in her hands, fingers digging into the brunette's biceps. "We've got your back."

Stacey has cleared off by the time they break away, and next to nobody seems to be paying attention anymore. But people are still picking up the papers, and they're still reading them with shocked faces and unavoidable gasps.

"Did you read them?"

Max shrugs, "Some." She quirks a brow in explanation, and her eyes search for El's when the girl zones out again. "I had to gauge the situation before I beat the shit out of everyone."

"And?"

"They're," the redhead stills, taking a second to choose her words carefully, "They're something."

El sighs, "Right."

She thinks back on the last text *she'd* sent him just before she fell asleep. It's not like it's crude or anything, it's just... She probably could have sent him something less suggestive.

I'll make it worth your while, I promise.

"Son of a bitch!" is the last thing she hears before she slips into her first class of the day, all eyes on her flushed face as soon she appears in the doorway.

Every single person seems to look up from their phones then, and just as one of the jocks in the back of the room holds up his phone like he's going to show her something — and it just so happens to be James with a shit eating smirk on his face — El's own phone beeps. And then Will's goes off, and Max's vibrates, and suddenly the whole hallway is buzzing.

It's an incoming text forwarded to the whole senior grade, but the only thing in the body is a link. El quickly clicks on it, waiting as a blue and white webpage slowly starts loading on her screen.

It's the seniors' Facebook group, and the latest post is just a picture of El's face. But the little arrows and the rapidly growing comments section let El know that *everything else* is on there now, too.

"Guess you *are* hot shit." Will whispers as he lowers his phone, leaning forward so only El can hear him. But somebody grumbles something below their breath and Will yelps, rubbing at his arm where he's been pinched.

El whips back around then, and Mike is closer than she expected him to be. He's not within view of the class, and the hallway has cleared out at this point. His phone is almost falling from his fingertips, a unzipped black hoodie hanging from his frame that makes El just want to hold him — but he has a smile on his face, and he looks... amused.

"Mike."

"Jane Eleanor," he wiggles a brow, smile widening into a smirk, "Who's Waffle Boy?"

2. two

The Party

"I just... I don't understand why they'd post them *everywhere*."

"Out of boredom, probably," Will rests a hand on his sister's back, drawing circles across the wool of her sweater, "because they're idiots."

Mike nods, moving to stand beside his friend. He shoves one hand inside his pocket and runs the other through his hair, "I say we try and figure out who did this."

"I'll tell you who did it," Lucas clears his throat, ringing out his hands, "It was you, you sly dog!"

With a grumble, Max's shoulders drop dramatically, and she leans back against the brick wall with a shake of her head, "I think it's pretty obvious, Wheeler." she quips, "Not everyone has beef with your girlfriend."

"Lower your voice!" El scolds her, reaching up to plaster a hand over the other girl's mouth. "And nobody has beef with me — for some reason, they're just envious of my relationship."

Lucas raises a hand then, cutting in, "So you're telling me Mike could pull a cheerleader if he wanted to?" The boy smirks, turning to his friend to smack him on the shoulder. "Man!" He grabs Mike by the bicep afterwards, ignoring the taller teen's eye roll.

The black haired-boy simply wiggles free from his friend's grasp, hands moving to mess with the zipper of his hoodie, "Not that I would want to anyway," he mumbles, "but *why* exactly are they jealous of El?" He looks over at Max, watching as the redhead stops mindlessly scanning her nails.

"Oh," she stands up straighter then, a glint in her eye letting Mike she's *glad he asked*, "They think you're some kind of God-dicked Romeo, I guess."

"Max!"

"He asked!" she retorts, "It's not my fault Wheeler's got everyone all hot and bothered with his sexting."

"I didn't even send anything remotely... *that*!" The boy denies, and his arms fly up dramatically, "Not a lot, at least."

Max gasps, head rolling back in disbelief. Then she swallows a breath, points a finger right at him, "You texted, and I quote, "***That thing you did last night? I'm doing it right now. Would be so much easier if you were here.***"

With a faint blush on his cheeks, Mike's eyes widen to the size of saucers, "That's not what that meant!"

The redhead scoffs, ignoring his comment completely, "Yeah, well, the green-eyed monster called and she wants your dick, Wheeler!"

"You know, maybe we should all just spread out," Dustin suggests then, interrupting to avoid drawing any unwanted attention from bystanders.

Granted, it's noon and it's lunch and they're like, the only group of people hanging outside at this time but... still — he figures it's best if no one overhears or sees them arguing because that might be a dead giveaway that there's tension in the party. And if there's obvious tension in the party, then it must be for a reason. And the only reason could be if one or more party members were hiding something *huge*-

He runs a finger along his chin as though he's planning something brilliant. "Think of it as, like, a mission."

"A *mission*?" Mike scowls, and his hands slide into his front pockets.

(Dustin's ideas usually suck. Naturally, Mike is skeptical.)

"Think about it, Mike." The curly-haired boy stands up, and he steps into line next to his best friend. He rests a hand on Mike's shoulder, wiggling his eyebrows in the others' direction. "If you wanna keep this thing," and he wags a finger between Mike and El then, "a secret, then you're gonna need eyes on the inside."

"Like spies," Will finally voices.

Lucas snaps his fingers, free hand coming to rest on his girlfriend's bicep. "Should we each take care of a clique?"

Dustin nods, "Obviously, you take the jocks." And Lucas offers a shrug in reply, clearly comfortable with that decision. "Max, you're in charge of the cheerleaders."

"What?" Max squeaks, "No! No way in hell am I doing that."

On the bench, El just stares into space, eyes glazing over as she numbly watches the people on the track run another lap. Tuning out his friends' bickering and taking a second to look down at the girl who started it all, Mike's face softens and he crouches down to her level to rest his hands on her knees. "Ignore them." He raises his brows, palms spreading across the denim thighs of her overalls, thumbs along the inside seams, "They're idiots."

"I know," El says, and her gaze shifts from the runners onto her boyfriend's face. "But maybe Dustin's right."

"This is gonna blow up in our faces, you know," Mike says, and it really isn't much of a question. He gives his lips a once-over, running his tongue along the skin and eyeing the ground below them. "I should just tell people," Mike says, muddy brown eyes raising to meet El's, "because you shouldn't have to endure this, you know."

"You can't," El tells him, and she reaches forward to pull at the elastic band around his wrist, pulling and resettling it around his skin without letting it sting. It's pink and new and oh-so-very *her*. She smiles.

"Why not?"

"Because then people would *know*," El reasons, and her explanation doesn't make much sense to him. "And if people know, then they feel like they get to have a say in how we live our lives. And I don't want other people in our relationship. I want you." And then it makes more sense.

Mike grins, and he squints as his voice lowers into a whisper, "other

people are already in our relationship." He tilts his head in direction of their friends, still bantering and trying to hammer out the details of their totally necessary '*sting operation*', as Dustin has just now called it.

El shrugs, bottom lip pulled between her teeth, "They don't count. They're-"

"You're asking me to infiltrate a terrorist organisation, and you expect me to *not* hit someone in the face?" Max suddenly exclaims, a single brow raising in bewilderment. After a beat, she shakes her head with a "hard pass, Dustbin," as monotone as ever.

The brunette simply leans into the boy then, lips beside his ear as she whispers sweet and low, "They're our friends," she breathes, sighs, "and if they *want to help* even half as much as I *want you* then I say we let them."

"They're at it again with the flirting," Will says behind a forced cough, fist pressed up against his lips. He dodges their gaze, focusing instead on Dustin.

"El, would you please tell these imbeciles that I can't deal with the airheads?"

"I mean-"

"You have to." Dustin interjects, practically shoving his finger in her face. "None of us can do it."

"And you think *I* can pull it off?" Max squeaks, and her eyebrows are so far up her face they're almost past her hairline. She shakes her head, shoulders raising in refusal, "I wouldn't even know where to start."

"Talk about boys or something." Will suggests, "That's what cheerleaders do, right?"

"Yeah." Lucas shrugs, and suddenly five pairs of eyes are on him. "Not that I *know*, I just... I'm guessing. The guys on the team are always talking about them so maybe they do it, too."

"Great." El drops her hands into her lap then. She turns to face her best friend, pleading eyes and all. "Ask them if they think anybody's cute."

"What, like an agony aunt?" The girl grimaces, "I can't do girl talk. I mean, *we* barely do girl talk and we're actually friends."

"Nobody else can do this." Mike reminds her, and he's suddenly the centre of attention, "El can't exactly walk up to them and just ask if they know about me."

"Why can't Will do it?"

"Will's in charge of the art fre- art *friends*. Of his art friends." Lucas explains, correcting himself in the process. He shoots the boy an apologetic look, shrugging, "And I've got the basketball team."

"Dustin?"

"The burnouts."

"And Mike can't do it," El adds.

"And you *can't*." Max rolls her eyes, pursing her lips. "You do know that it was them that did this, don't you?"

El sighs, and she looks up at Mike with a muted expression. "I know." She blinks, shoulders dropping as her brows dip in the space between her eyes, "No one else would care enough."

"I don't think it's them caring as much as it is them playing with you," Will tells his step-sister.

"Thankfully," Dustin starts, and he sticks a hand out with a look between his friends, "we're a pretty kick-ass team."

Max

"What do *you* want?"

"Your hostility, definitely." The redhead grumbles, and she moves to

straddle the bench in front of the girls. She drags her teeth across her bottom lip, eyeing the small group of cheerleaders suspiciously.

This definitely wasn't on her list of things to do today. Hell, this wouldn't even make the first draft of her bucket list.

Max had wanted things to go as they usually did; she and El would chit-chat, she and Dustin would argue over something stupid, she and Mike would bicker before resorting to arm-punches, she and Will would speak in code until somebody told them to knock it off.

And then she'd spend her afternoon with Lucas, either making out in the back of his car or sharing a pint of ice-cream in his backyard, trying to ignore his sister's constant pestering.

But shit hit the fan, her *hectic* schedule took a turn, and now she's gotta do damage control.

Instead of eating lunch together, the group had all taken a straw, taken their queue and spread out across the many cliques of the Hawkins High social hierarchy. But no one, she thinks, is more out of their comfort zone than her right now.

Lucas got lucky, Dustin would be fine, Will would be in his element, Mike just had to keep to himself, and El well... El was sitting this one out, for pretty obvious reasons.

But Max? Max drew the short straw. Max had to infiltrate the polyester-soaked lollipop heads and assess the situation from inside. But these girls were responsible for her friend's current humiliation and she wasn't gonna let that go easily.

She's crossed the no man's land, she's built a bridge made out of rose-scented pink-colored paper, and it's total bullshit.

(She even kind of misses Erica Sinclair right now.)

Glancing down at her canvas pumps, Max shuffles them under the bench she's sitting on. She twists her ankles from side to side, pressing upon the palms of her hands as she takes in the cheerleaders before her.

She's so far removed from these girls. They're all preppy, and squeaky, and *pretty*. They wear short, *short* skirts that leave practically nothing to the imagination. They contour their faces with expensive makeup to accentuate their best features. They wear ironed, buttoned-up yellow and coral and pink cardigans over the tops of their uniforms. Their cheer sneakers are white and spotless, no signs of scuffing or stretching or mudding.

(Max might even envy them if she wasn't so confident in herself.)

One of them is eating a piece of dry bread — the kind with the nuts and no flavor whatsoever. She has a sour expression on her face, which means she's probably not enjoying it in the slightest. Max doesn't remember her name but she's pretty sure the girl is a new student this year. She has black hair and perhaps the thickest eyebrows Max has ever seen.

As she munches down on the wheaty loaf, there's a hand curling around her shoulder, as though encouraging her to finish the food. Max pulls a face, gaze trailing up to the girl stood behind the newbie. She's taller than her, blonde with an innocent-enough looking face.

Biting her tongue and forcing down a comment, Max skips right to the point, "You guys know who hacked my friend's phone?"

(Okay, so *that* wasn't what El asked her to do... but whatever.)

"Who says anybody hacked her?"

"Are you saying *you* didn't?"

"I'm saying maybe she shouldn't have left her phone unlocked." It's not Strawberry Blonde who pipes up, but rather the tallest one of the bunch, the self-professed ringleader — Stacey. The brunette on the bench two rows above Max glares down at her fellow senior, "That's all."

"That didn't mean it was up for grabs," Max reasons, but she soon finds three pairs of eyes zooming in on her face, scowls and all. "I mean-" a breath, then, "I really just wanna know who you guys think it is."

"How are we supposed to know?"

"A total babe."

"I'd do him."

"Stace!" Strawberry Blonde's eyes almost bulge out of her head, "Oh my gosh."

"What?" The girl flips the bottom of her ponytail over her shoulder with a roll of the eyes, "He sounds romantic so he probably knows how to bone down."

The newbie swallows a final bite of her bread before whispering, dreamily, "One can only imagine." She gazes off then.

Stifling a laugh, Max presses her elbows into her knees, one-hundred percent immersed now. Are they really fawning over *Wheeler*? Like, sure, they don't know it's him and they'd probably regret it if they did but-

"Let's be honest," Stacey clicks her tongue, hands folding in her lap so primly as her ankles cross, "He's probably a jock." She looks from left to right, eyeing her friends almost knowingly, "I'm betting on James or that new midfielder."

"Really?" Girl-whose-name-Max-really-needs-to-learn-soon says, green eyes twinkling with someone akin to sadness, "The cute one with the red hair and the cheekbones?"

(Cheekbones? Check.)

"Yeah, I mean, he's total nobody. But, like, I think even he would be quiet about doing the chief's daughter on the sly."

"I doubt it. Didn't you see last Sunday's texts?" The blonde girl practically *blushes* — and Max has to hold herself back from full-on cackling in the girl's face, "The *wording*? Our guys just don't talk like that."

Stacey just nods, nonchalantly brushing her fringe out of her face, "I know." She shakes her head, licking her lips.

(Max might as well not even be there anymore.)

"I had a bad today but knowing I'll see you tomorrow was worth every damn second." The newbie says, quoting what was obviously a Mike-sent text.

Max watches in amusement (and somehow total fucking despair) as these girls — these popular cheerleaders with their perfect smiles and perfect lives and perfect reputations — quite literally (and unknowingly) fangirl over her nerdy maybe-friend.

(They're gonna wanna die when they find out who's been sexy-texting El. Max can't wait.)

Stacey purses her lips, peering over at the other girls and completely ignoring the smirk on Max's face. ***"I wanted to hold you last night but I don't think I could have done just that and nothing else. The very idea of you drives me crazy."***

"What else would you have done?"

"Love you. Ardently and keenly and hopefully without interruption this time." Stacey finishes, and Max is just glad she'd bypassed that part of their text chain because *eek! cringe! Wheeler's such a sucker!*

"He sounds hot."

"They sound *in* love." Newbie throws in, "Like, true love." In fairness, she looks like she's about sixteen so... Max will forgive her for thinking teenage romances are everlasting.

Max scoffs, "I don't know about true love." She raises a brow, feels her face burning under their gazes, "They just sound horny to me."

Newbie mumbles something beneath her breath, head shaking in denial as though the very idea is ridiculous.

"Didn't *you* read the messages?" The other girl — Jennifer Hayes with the strawberry highlights and the turned-up nose — squeaks, arms folding over her chest as chipped-polish fingers circle her biceps. She's stopped force-feeding the new girl now. "He's obviously a total romantic."

"Or a pussy." Max jabs behind gritted teeth, lips pursing in irritation.

"Just because no one has ever treated you like WB treats Hopper..."

Quirking a brow and ignoring her comment, Max asks, "WB?"

"Waffle Boy." Stacey's eyes widen, and she raises both eyebrows matter-of-factly as though it's something Max should have known. Her lips part after a second, and she huffs out, "The guy in the texts."

(Don't punch her. Don't punch her. Don't punch her yet.)

Max smirks, challenging her with a look, "Yeah, I got that." She deadpans, tugging on the loose sleeves of her jacket. She runs her fingers along the denim, scratching at the yellow stitching holding the patches of fabric together. Licking her lips with a tilt of the head, she says, "I'm just surprised you guys are so invested that you've come up with an acronym for a nickname."

Stacey crosses her legs then, all ladylike and proper, and she drops her hands into her lap in a way that's so practised that Max is half convinced she's also a debutante... which is probably true. "Why wouldn't we be invested? Two of our fellow seniors fell in love. Why wouldn't we-"

"You've never even talked to either of them."

(And suddenly her foot is in her mouth and so far down her throat, she's actually choking on rubber.)

"Either of them?" Jennifer asks. The corner of her lips turns up, some kind of glee on her face, "You know who he is." She states, accusingly, and she nudges her friend in the elbow. Stacey perches forward on the bench, forearms resting across her knees, a sneaker-clad foot wagging almost excitedly in the air.

"What?" The redhead furrows her brows, forcing confusion across her face. She gulps, running the ball of her hand across her collarbones just as Stacey runs her tongue across her upper teeth, clearly intrigued. She's meat to the slaughter now. "No, I don't."

"Then what did you mean?" Stacey asks, and suddenly she's standing

up and taking a step toward the redhead, crossing the threshold of the bench that separated them. The brunette flutters her lashes, snarling, "Did you just step in it, Mayfield?"

"Not that it matters," and Max stands up then, hands sliding down to her front pockets to comfort herself, calm herself. This *bitch*- She sighs, "but I have no idea who he is. El doesn't really like to share that kinda thing. We don't talk about boys."

The brunette frowns, "El?"

"Jane," Jennifer whispers, nudging her friend again, this time in the ribs. "It's her nickname." She says matter-of-factly, and Max now has twenty questions for the girl. It's not like Jennifer Hayes is a part of their friend group, so how does she know about the name reserved for El's friends and family? Granted, she's not the worst member of the squad, and she's actually kind of friendly sometimes, but-

"Whatever." Stacey brushes off her friend, waving a hand about, "We have to go practice now." She says, diverting her attention back to the outcasted girl, "See you around, Mayfair."

Jennifer clears her throat, "It's Mayfield."

With that, the captain of the Tigers' cheer squad is walking away. She swings her hips more than necessary, raising her arms up above her head to tighten the painful-looking ponytail she's sporting as she goes. Jennifer falls into step with her a moment later, after bidding Max the quickest goodbye in human history.

Max only stares after the girls as they walk away, a single brow quirked in astonishment. She sits down on the bleachers then, pushing up on her forearms as her legs kick out in front of her, "Can't wait." Max speaks, voice perkier and *cheerier* than usual — totally mocking.

Thirty seconds later, when they're down the steps with their synchronised ponytails in full swing, someone calls out to her.

Squinting to get a clearer view of just who it is, she smiles, a hand shading her face from the sun as they run up to meet her.

"What's up-"

Will swallows, "We have a problem." He pulls on her elbow, urging her to stand up, "Find Lucas."

Dustin

In retrospect, Dustin really should've just kept his mouth shut. If he would have just nodded along, agreed with whatever the hell Mike had been rambling on about, then he wouldn't be in this situation. He wouldn't have been dealt the short straw: The potheads.

It makes sense, really. Everybody else — well, aside from Max — had their own little side cliques that they go hang out with and probe for information, all without raising suspicion. But him, Dustin Henderson who likes to people-please and entertain... Dustin Henderson was the odd one out. He doesn't fit *in* anywhere.

He likes to think that everyone is his friend, or at least that he's on speaking terms with a good ninety percent of the student body and staff. He gets good grades, he makes 'em laugh; he's the perfect student. But while Lucas has his buddies on the basketball team, and Will is in with the craftier kids, Dustin doesn't know where he belongs.

He's involved with the AV Club, the Chess Club, and he tutors on weekends. He plays teacher's assistant when someone is struggling in a class he excels at. He volunteered for the food drive last year (because he thought it'd bring him closer to a certain blonde cheerleader) and he once spent a whole Saturday wagging a bucket, collecting donations for some freshman's knee surgery.

He's a good guy, and he likes to think he's cool. But he doesn't really belong with any subgroup of high schoolers, and it's never really been a problem until now.

(The potheads. Shit.)

Rounding the corner that will take him beneath the outside bleachers, Dustin rolls up the sleeves of his sweatshirt. The orange

material gathers around his elbows, and he cracks his knuckles as he works up the courage to open his mouth, address the handful of hipster-looking beanie-sporting guys before him.

Maybe if he acts like he's trying to score some weed then-

"Is that you, Henderson?"

It's a blond guy that asks the question, a half-eaten sandwich hanging from his lips. Dustin's pretty sure his name is Matt but he doesn't wanna look like an idiot so he just settles for a nod.

"Gentlemen," the curly-haired boy runs his tongue over his upper teeth, plastering a grin on his face, "What is happening?"

"Not much," Could-be-Matt replies, and he rolls down the foil of his homemade 'wich before taking another bite. He chomps down on the food, shoots his friends a glance. He's Dustin's way *in*. "What can we do for you, Hendy?"

(He's never known if that was an affectionate nickname or not. He's pretty sure it's wordplay. Hendy. Handy. *A handy.*)

(Dicks.)

Taking confident steps forward, Dustin plops himself down onto the unfolded empty stool across from Could-be-Matt.

"Just wondering what you guys are up to." Okay, so that wasn't a *great* start.

"The usual." Another of the guys pipes up. He has his back turned, and he's hunched over an overturned garbage can. Dustin can *smell* what he's doing. He's pretty sure the guy's at least, like, twenty years old. "Rolling."

"Rolling, huh?" The boy clears his throat, and he crosses his ankles together with a deep breath. He forces a grin, "You do that a lot?"

(You're making it worse, dummy.)

The roller just chuckles, some deep-seeded laugh Dustin's a little

thrown off by. He nods, glancing over his shoulder, "You wanna join?"

(Shit. Abort. Abort.)

"I mean," he shrugs, "Maybe later." He needs info first. He leans back then, pressing into the curve of a bench behind him. "God, it's crazy today."

"Like, how?" Could-be-Matt frowns, and he finally crumbles up the aluminium foil in his hand, tossing it at one of his friends' heads. "You talking about that weird sext thing?"

"I don't think they're *sexts*." He blinks, "Well, not all of them. Maybe. I don't know."

"Yeah, you read them?" The roller is fully turned around now, and he flicks long brown hair over his shoulder. "Shit was hot."

"Girl sounds like she puts out."

Dustin nods, face expressionless. This is *not* how he'd expected it to go. Talking about his friends' sex life is-

(Nope. No. Not happening.)

"Hey, man, don't you know her?" The blond boy taps Dustin's knee then, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively. "What's the deal?"

"The deal?"

"Yeah, you know," his eyes widen, tongue wagging out of the corner of his mouth like a dog out of a car window, "the deal."

"I mean, I think she's fairly happy in her relationship, so-"

"So you know who the player is?"

"The *player*?"

(Are they... turning the interrogation back on him?)

(Well, shit.)

"Yeah, man. Geez, didn't you read- Hey, here." The brunet holds up a finger then, and he moves his joint from one hand to the other. Reaching down, he picks up a crumbled-up piece of paper from behind the trash can.

It's bright blue, frayed as though it's been read and re-read over and over again before finally having been tossed aside. Dustin gulps.

Remind me to pull out next time, El.

(Yikes.)

No, because then it would have gone everywhere.

(Double yikes.)

There's a reason he avoided reading any of those texts.

Firstly, he has (some) integrity and they were private messages sent to and from some of his best friends and he didn't wanna add to the flurry of teens who were invading their privacy. Second... well, because he has to deal with them being all lovey-dovey outside of school and that is already *enough*.

"It's not one of you guys?"

"As if!" Roller waves a hand about, tutting. "I don't think any of us would dare mess with the Chief's kid." He shrugs, and then he's holding out to joint and Dustin is just *cornered*.

Slowly taking the hit from the other teen, Dustin eyes it considerably. Would it really matter if he-

"Yeah, I don't care how hot she is," Could-be-Matt shakes his head, pulling on the end of his beanie so it covers his fringe, "I'm not getting arrested for no hookup."

Dustin can't help but pull a face then, and he can Roller sparking up his lighter out of the corner of his eyes. Crap, well- "I don't think they're hooking up. I think they're actually the real deal."

"Eh," one of the guys in the back speaks up then, and Dustin is no

longer under the illusion that the guy was asleep, "I definitely think it's a married guy. He just *sounds* older, you know?" He rasps, rubbing his hands up and down his arms. "Chicks love older guys."

"Oh, you read them too, huh?" The curly-haired boy mumbles, and he chews at the inside of his teeth for all of a second before Could-be-Matt is filling the silence again.

"It's totally a teach', you know it," he high-fives his drippy friend then, nodding in agreement, "Probably did it for the grade, too."

"I don't think-"

"They're right, my man." Roller lays a hand on Dustin's shoulder, "Now." He drops the lighter into Dustin's lap, and when the boy glances up at the older teen he's just smirking, "Your turn."

(Ah, shit.)

"Dustin!"

Suddenly Lucas is the savior he never knew he needed.

Standing up and brushing down his jeans, Dustin drops the lighter and joint back down onto his stool. "Boys," he waves a hand, "it's been fun. Let's not do this again."

Scurrying away, Dustin quickly makes it over to his friend within a matter of seconds. He smirks, shoots a look over his shoulder, "Man, they're-"

"I really don't care." Lucas shakes his head, and he rests his hand on his hips with a look, "You need to find El. Like, right now."

"Huh?"

Will

"Literally, like, I don't know anyone who is bored enough to care," Brett tells him, and he lays a hand on Will's shoulder before the boy can feel offended. "No shade to your sister. She's lovely, I *know* she's

lovely, but..." he tilts his head, a brow wiggling in thought, "you know."

Will nods, a small smile lighting up his face, "I get it." His gaze lands on the hand delicately placed on his arm now, watching as Brett moves it down to his elbow. Lips drawing thin in modesty, Will looks up at the blond boy's face, "You haven't told anybody, have you?"

(Because, yes, he'd told Brett. And, yes, he actually kind of regretted it.)

His hand drops then, and Will's smile does, too.

"No!" Brett's eyes widen, almost in disbelief at the thought, "I would never. It's not my place."

"Well, thanks." The shorter boy says, and he clenches the strap of his bookbag tighter in his hand, "El would kill me if she found out."

"Mike wouldn't?"

"Mike's a little more... relaxed when it comes to this kind of thing, I think." Will explains, and he turns to face his own secret boyfriend then. "I guess I'm more like her than I thought."

"Because you wanna keep *this* quiet?" Brett's nose crinkles then, and he flashes his pearly whites, "Whatever you want to do until you're ready."

A faint blush rises to his cheeks suddenly, and he leans up on the toes of his pumps to press his lips against Brett's. The taller boy momentarily stills before reacting, threading Sharpie-covered fingers through Will's messy hair. He tugs on the strands at the base of the boy's neck, mumbling something incoherent just before pulling away.

"Did you," Will starts, and he thumbs his bottom lip with a shy smile, "Did you read them? The texts?" He dares a look up at the blond, brows raising in curiosity.

(Please say no.)

"I mean," Brett clears his throat, "I had of had to. They were all over

the school this morning." He sighs, "Does it bother you that I did? Because I can pretend I didn't and we can go back to *not* knowing the details of your sister's sex life." He offers with a smile, nudging Will affectionately.

"Oh, God, she has a sex life?" Will cringes, "I thought they were still on second base."

"Yeah, you know, stuff like ***"You were so wet last night, it's insane"*** can only be taken one way, Will." Brett teases him.

Will throws a hand up against his mouth then, eyes closing as he fake gags, "No, no, no. You didn't just say that!"

"Is that," Brett mumbles behind Will's hand, and when the boy only blinks, he wags a finger out in front of him.

Will turns around to see what he's pointing to, and he gasps in surprise.

(Ah.)

"Hop?" Will makes a noise from past his teeth, wiping his hand across his t-shirt after lifting it off of Brett's mouth.

The taller boy just smiles back and forth between the pair before he resorts to glancing around the empty hallway, mindlessly bouncing on his heels and minding his own business.

Five seconds later, Hopper is walking toward the pair. There's a pink flyer in one hand, and a yellow one in the other. He staring down at the papers as he walks, lips moving as he approaches.

"You seen your sister anywhere?" Hopper asks, and he moves his right hand to rest it on his hip. He slips a finger past a belt hoop, eyes his step-son accusatorily, "Huh?"

(Well, technically...)

Will just shrugs, making use of his many afternoons spent rehearsing with Dustin for the *'Winter Spectacle!'*. He keeps his face straight, blank, and says "Not since this morning."

"Chief," Brett greets him, and he holds a hand up as though to salute the man. Then he's smiling down at Will and getting the hell out of dodge, speedily making his way down the corridor.

The chief simply throws his head back slightly, but he never lifts his eyes off of Will, "You wouldn't lie to me, would you?" he asks, "Because, if you do, you're gonna be on greens all week."

"You wouldn't dare." Will accuses.

Hopper raises a brow in challenge, and he squashes the papers in his hand then, "I would." He nods, confirming, "Now, I've gotta have a word with my daughter. Do you know where she is or not?"

Will gestures down to the screenshot texts in the chief's hands, "She's kinda been having a rough morning, you know, so-"

"Oh, I know. I got a call from your lousy ass principal who felt the need to tell me my daughter was the victim of a school prank."

"It's not really a prank, but-"

"So she really sent these?"

(Should he sell his sister out for the sake of a more delicious meal tonight? No. Is he going to? Eh...)

"I mean," Will gulps, throat suddenly running dry, "Sort of."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know."

"Then find her for me." Hopper raises his brows, chewing his bottom lip, "And if you know who this Waffle kid is, then-"

Will rises up on his heels then, straightening his back as he throws two thumbs up, "Yep. Gonna go find El now."

(Max will know where she is, surely.)

Lucas

Is he really gonna spend his entire lunch period doing this? Yes.

Is he going to live to regret it? Probably.

Does he care? Not really.

"Man, this has been a wild morning."

It's exactly five minutes past one, Lucas is tossing a basketball up and down in the air, and there are two other teammates sat in front of him. One of them has red hair and a five o'clock shadow. The other is the team captain's right-hand man; James.

Lucas keeps his eyes focused on the ceiling of the locker room, waiting for the ball to drop. He catches it, aims it directly at James' chest. "Right?"

(They're not the greatest of friends. Not when Lucas' girlfriend punched James' best friend square in the jaw and refused to apologize.)

Lucas nods, mostly to himself, and he hums under his breath as the other two create a space between them on the bench to settle the ball down.

"One of you know who did it?" Lucas wipes his chin with the back of his hand, sniffing to cover his stress.

"Stole her phone or screwed her?" James quips, and Lucas really wants to knock that smug expression right off of his pasty face, "Wasn't me," he says, left eye narrowing, "wouldn't turn her down though."

"Like she'd be interested." The red-haired kid jabs, chuckling to himself. He stretches his legs out in front of him while shooting Lucas a look, "He's probably in college. Those pervs love high school girls."

"You think the Chief would let her mess around with college guys?" James snorts, shoulders rolling back, "No way in hell. Nah, he's probably just some loser."

"Makes sense." Lucas agrees, lowering his gaze to the floor.

(Don't slip up now, Sinclair.)

"Maybe that' why they're keeping quiet."

James pulls a face then, "I mean, who really cares anyway, right?" He asks, and then he's picking the ball back up. He tosses it to Lucas, watching with squinty eyes as the boy clutches it to his chest, "Hey, you're her friend,"

(Oh, no.)

"You think it's one of your friends?"

"I think I'd know."

"Maybe you just wouldn't tell us."

Lucas' brows furrow, "No, I'd definitely tell you," he pauses, "You know, if one of my boys was... doing her."

(Gulp. Upchuck. Bile. Eww.)

"You think she's putting out?"

"Dude, don't talk about her like that," Lucas warns the older boy, a hand flying out in protest. He shakes his head, "It's not, you know, fair."

"You just did!"

"No, I didn't!"

"Hey, it's not his fault she sends stuff like," and the red-bearded teen holds up a finger then. He reaches into his back pocket, and it's as though he's conjuring one of the printed pages out of thin air. Lucas can only sigh, wait as he reads, ***You can put it anywhere, you know.***

James throws his hands up, grinning wildly now, "See? She's a nympho."

"What?!" Lucas squeaks, and he reaches back to tighten his bandana.

The sweat is just pooling-

"I still think he's a loser."

"Nah, it's totally a college dude." The new kid argues, "No high schooler uses shit like 'winsome' in a text, am I right? That's next level. She's definitely putting out for that."

"Babe?"

Lucas turns around then, and the ball in his hands drops to the floor.

Max is stood in the doorway, a hand wrapped around the frame as she pops her hip. She grits her teeth, forcing a smile onto her face, "Can we talk?"

Jennifer

"Can you believe it though?" Stacey pulls a tube of lipstick and a pack of gum from the loose pocket of her skirt. She places them down beside the sink and flicks on the tap, shaking her head, "Plain little Jane scored herself a Romeo."

Jennifer smiles, and she whips around so her back is pressing against the counter. Her hands reach out to push against the unit, elbows bending sharply. "You almost sound jealous."

Midway-through washing her hands, Stacey shoots her a look, and Jennifer instantly regrets her choice of words, "I'm not jealous." The brunette says, unflinching, "I'm just curious."

"We're all curious." Jennifer tells her, "It's cute," she shrugs, "and kinda fun."

"This isn't fun." The head cheerleader corrects her, and suddenly she's turning the tap off and spinning on her heel to face the blonde. "I just wanna know who the guy is so we can go back to forgetting they even exist."

"If you didn't want people to care then maybe you shouldn't have stolen her phone," Jennifer starts, mumbling, "and posted everything

online."

"It's been, like, a day. I thought someone would have figured-" Stacey cuts herself off then, distracted by a noise coming from the fourth stall — it almost sounded like someone was being strangled.

The fourth stall is the one just behind her, and it's only one where the door's been locked shut. She raises a brow in question, dry lips parting. Suddenly, there's a bang from inside the stall, and the door rattles accordingly.

"What is that?" The space between Stacey's brows creases and she turns to her friend with a slight frown. The brunette nudges her shoulder then, shoving her forward, "Go see."

"Why do I have to do it?" Jennifer cries, hands flying up to adjust her ponytail. She pulls a face when Stacey just tilts her head, eyes wide and commanding. "Fine." She huffs, and takes a few steps over to the third stall, where the door is wide open and inviting, almost like it's encouraging her to come and spy on whoever has locked themselves inside the fourth cubicle.

Closing the lid and raising a foot onto the surface, she pushes up on the back of the tank to hoist herself up, her sneakers squeaking against the chipped seat. With a deep breath, she pushes up on her tiptoes and grabs the wall to her right.

Peering over into the other stall, Jennifer's brows rise up almost to her hairline. Her lips part in surprise at the sight before her, a small gasp escaping as her fingers curl over the divide, chipped coral nail polish a stark contrast to the off-white of the restroom walls.

(Not what was I was expecting.)

Wide-eyed, she stares down at Jane Hopper with pause, confused and stunned into silence all at once.

It's not like there's anything R-rated going on — it's all actually rather PG-13 — but the fact that the girl who's been keeping everyone on their toes — falling head over ass as they try to unravel her personal life and figure her out — is just casually, openly making out with

some guy in the girls' bathroom is pretty amazing. Okay, so it's not really open because it's the girls' toilets and they at least had the decency to shut the door to give themselves a little privacy.

Jennifer has to wonder if it wouldn't have been easier to just to do it in under the bleachers, like all the other couples who can't seem to keep their hands off of each other for longer than five seconds. None of those teens has the entire senior class on their backs though.

And, to her credit, Jane at least looks like she's trying to conceal his identity.

Her hands are cupping his face, thumbs pressing into the flesh covering his cheekbones, sharp and practically bruised from the force of the girl's touch, and she's kissing him so hard that Jennifer has a difficult time believing either of them can even breathe right now. Jane keeps humming, practically moaning, and — good for him! — the guy totally has a hand on her ass.

Eyebrows knitting in curiosity, Jennifer tilts her head to catch a clearer look at the boys' face. He's all long arms and dark hair and a boring rugby shirt and-

(Well, shit.)

As though sensing her presence, the boy's eyes flicker open just then, and his gaze momentarily lands on Jane's face before it's travelling up. And just as she makes to duck out of sight, Mike Wheeler's eyes are staring right up at her — Jennifer Hayes, all brown-eyed confusion and the actual embodiment of *oops!*

How could she not have seen this coming? Jane and Wheeler are as thick as thieves, like two peas in a pod.

(Of course, it was *him!*)

How nobody could have guessed this already, she doesn't know. They're always together. They're always close. They're always whispering. They're always smiling at one another.

And, okay, Jennifer's not a stalker but she notices things. She likes to people-watch, to see how people who don't run in her circle go about

their lives. Stacey might like to pretend that anyone who isn't an athlete or a teacher doesn't matter, but Jennifer isn't like that.

She likes imagining what the nerdier kids talk about, if they have the same kinds of conversations that she and her friends do, or if they just bicker over which movie they're going to see that night. She likes to think about what the art freaks do on the weekends, whether they spend all their free time scrapbooking magazine cutouts or graffitiing the backs of department store buildings. She's always watching, always surveying everyone. So how could she have missed this?

(Maybe it was *too* obvious.)

But what she doesn't understand, what she really doesn't get, is why they wouldn't just come out with it and tell everyone? Or at least make it known that they were dating. It's not like they'd have to make some big announcement in the school paper or anything, declaring their love for one another to make sure everyone knew they were an item. Surely just being open with your relationship would be a lot easier than stealing kisses in dirty bathroom stalls and pretending you weren't secretly, like, totally head over heels for one another. And Jennifer's read those text messages — she just *knows* they're in love.

Are we still on for Saturday? Back row? Popcorn and Milk Duds? One straw, two mouths, and a fondness for raspberry chapstick? If so, can't wait. Love you, El.

Then again, why would they have done that, told everyone? They aren't friends with the majority. Jane tends to hang around with the artsier kids if she's not keeping to herself, and Wheeler runs with the few remaining AV Club nerds, but their closest friends are those four other 'weirdos'.

Lucas Sinclair is on the basketball team — so, okay, not a *total* weirdo — but back in middle school, he used to be one of those tech-savvy geeks just like Wheeler and his friends. Jennifer thinks he came into his own once he entered high school, joining a sports' team and befriending the more athletic types. He wasn't a total jock though, and he still spent most of his free periods with his old friends. He was probably the least outcasted of them all; splitting his time between

late afternoon practices and hangouts with his 'real' friends down at the mall — she wasn't spying, she swears.

Runners-up to him was Max Mayfield and Dustin Henderson.

Dustin was the closest thing they had to a class clown. That's not to say he was laughed at and made fun of — *anymore*, at least — but he was usually the one sat at the back of the classroom cracking jokes and bantering with the teacher. And he definitely wasn't stupid either. He had some of the highest grades in any of their (shared) classes, so Jennifer knows he's smart. She's pretty sure he uses humor as a defence mechanism, but that doesn't stop most of everyone from enjoying his presence. He really does liven a room. And, okay, he's definitely gotten cuter with puberty.

Max, however, was like the black sheep of the bunch — she didn't join any teams or volunteer for any fundraisers, but everyone in school seemed to like her well enough. She had a bit of a temper sometimes — *Troy totally deserved that broken nose!* But for the most part she was nice, polite, and even kind of funny. And, from what Jen can tell, she's probably a pretty great friend because, as she's just now realising, Max had *totally* infiltrated them for information.

(She's just gone up like fifteen power points in Jennifer's estimation of her.)

Below her on the food chain was Mike Wheeler. A total nerd, without a doubt a smart-ass, and the de-facto leader of his friend group. He runs the AV Club with Dustin, but he's pretty clearly the President. He's not unpopular but he's also not, like, man candy that girls fantasize about. Okay, he's cute in an emo-in-an-indie-movie kind of way, and even Jennifer will admit that she'd let those cheekbones slice her in half, but he's a complete and utter dork. He wears those kooky, awful Christmas knits deep into February, and he always seems to be carrying around a book and a screwdriver. And, for some weird reason, he wears a different color hair-tie on his wrist every single day which is just *odd* because his hair's longer and fuller than most boys, but definitely not enough to need tying up.

Next came Jane Hopper and Will Byers. Step-siblings who spent more time reading and painting than they did socialising. Jane — who goes

by El to her friends and family for reasons Jennifer doesn't understand and knowingly has no business in knowing — was actually kind of... well...

Thinking back, Jennifer remembers a time when Stacey had once told her while chewing gum and curling her fringe around her fingers, that Jane was a 'quiet pretty', the kind of girl who wasn't aware of just how easy on the eye they were. She'd said Jane had a perfectly-shaped face, naturally highlighted hair that framed said face, and she didn't need makeup because her feminine features — meaning, long eyelashes and cute button nose — were prominent enough. Jennifer had just rolled her eyes, brushing off her comments. But now maybe she thinks she sees it.

Jane is pretty, but not in the way Stacey thought. She's quiet, sure. But she also smiles a lot, and she has these tiny little isms that make Jennifer think that maybe she knows how charming she is. This doesn't mean Jane plays on it, but rather she's aware of her beauty without needing people to remind her. And she could easily pass as a cheerleader if it weren't for the torn knees on her grey overalls, or the oversized sweaters she tends to stuff into the waistband of her jeans.

The only one in their friend group lower than her on the food chain is Will Byers. He likes to keep to himself for the most part, which is mainly why his interactions with anyone outside of his close-knit circle, or the other art freaks, are next to none — well aside from his maybe-boyfriend (who might actually bump him up a few points). He's not a total freak, per se. Will just usually comes to school, hangs with the same people, does his work and is on his way. He's on the yearbook committee though, and Jen almost thinks that counts for something until she remembers that he's, like, the only student in the entire school who can take a decent picture without using a selfie stick or a filter app.

This isn't to say that their places in the high school hierarchy are set in stone. If those text messages, and people's interest in them, are anything go by, then Jane — and, by (secret) proxy, Mike — are gonna be *hot shit* by the time this whole mystery's up. And if they're hot shit, then even their most unpopular friends will be, too.

Snapping back to reality, and realising that she's been making

uncomfortable eye contact with Wheeler for a good while now, Jennifer clears her throat.

The girl in his arms seems to catch on then, and she's shifting back out of his grasp to follow his gaze. Her hand slides up his arm, wrapping around his shoulder almost protectively, and Jennifer watches as realisation dawns on the pair.

(Gotcha!)

Jane quickly removes her hand from Mike's arm as though he's aflame, a shift in the atmosphere causing alarm to flash over her face, and she presses her index finger up against her lips, fingertip against her cupid's bow. It's a silent plea to silence the cheerleader. But when Jennifer does nothing to show that she's got the message — and isn't going to give them up — Jane lowers her finger and she opts instead for mouthing *'please don't tell'* to really get her message across.

At that, Jennifer slowly peels her hands off of the wall separating the stalls and she runs her tongue over her bottom lip thoughtfully, as though she's thinking over what to do.

She could easily tell Stacey who was in the stall; say something along the lines of 'Hopper was totally making out with Wheeler in there' and have Stacey connect the dots herself, update the Facebook page and let everyone they've sussed them out. But that would mean giving up the game, the mystery... and Jennifer's not quite sure she's ready to do that.

And, besides, it might be kind of fun to be in on the secret, to give her friends false leads and keep them off of Wheeler's scent. Maybe she can help.

"What is it?" Stacey's voice rings out, and the blonde can make out the faint sound of a lipstick tube being closed. Her friend smacks her lips together, and Jennifer's pulled from her daze. "Is someone screwing in there or what? Why are you taking so long?"

Jennifer blinks, lashes fluttering as her gaze drifts from the couple in the next stall to the head cheerleader stood in the doorway of her own cubicle.

The other girl has a hand on her hip, a brow raised in amusement, "Holy crap. People *are* screwing." Stacey moves to step up on the lid of the seat then, a hand gripping the wall. "Move! I wanna see." But before she can, Jennifer shoves her back.

"No!" Jennifer brushes her hair behind her ears then, hopping down off of the closed toilet with the lightest of thumps. Her sneakers squeak as she emerges from the stall, hands swinging behind her back innocently as Stacey follows. "Let's just say, I'm glad I didn't have that questionable chicken yesterday." She quirks a brow, forcing a straight face as she spins around to face Stacey.

The brunette simply pulls a face, and her lips draw thin, "Ew." Stacey says, a hand slipping into the pocket of her skirt to deposit her lipstick now. "Gross."

Jennifer nods, and she bounces on her heels almost animatedly, "Shall we go?"

Stacey doesn't reply. Instead, she just rolls her eyes and brushes around the other girl with a sigh, heading for the door. With a hand curled around the handle, she whispers, "Why were you watching them for so long anyway, you weirdo..."

The blonde just grins, rounding the corner of the restrooms. She's a good foot behind Stacey when she spots him — uniform and badge and the luxe.

"Don't say anything." Stacey mumbles, tugging on her arm when the blonde has stumbled into her back.

Chief Hopper is stood down the end of the hallway, talking to the principal. He's got a stack of flyers in his right hand, and his left is perched on his hip as though he's out for blood.

Jennifer watches as he crumbles the papers in his fist then, pointing a finger directly into the other man's chest.

He is *not* happy.

As though reading her mind, the Chief suddenly turns toward her. His eyes narrow in on the two girls, frown lines visible even from afar.

"You!"

Mike

Having spent the past half hour dodging classmates and nosy teachers who wanted the 'inside scoop' by keeping himself busy in the AV room, Mike is just about ready to sit down in a classroom and pretend the better half of three hundred teenagers *aren't* curious about his love life.

(One kid had literally tapped him on the shoulder just to flash one of those bright yellow pages in his face as though it would get a rise out of him. He's done.)

"Mike!"

Peeking out from behind his locker, Mike eyes his friend down the hallway. He has about two minutes before his afternoon English class.

"Hide!" Lucas shouts from down the corridor, hands cupped around his mouth. He jogs up to the dark-haired kid, nudging his arm with his elbow, "Dude, you need to go, like, hide under a rock or something." Lucas shakes his head, out of breath, and he pulls on the flaps of the bandana wrapped around his head to tighten them.

Mike frowns, sliding a thick textbook in between two others, "Why?" He asks, closing his locker shut. He keeps a hand pressed against the door, watching as Lucas stretches his arms out above his head as though he's exhausted.

Pulling his right knee up to his chest, Lucas waits for a soft '*click*' before he answers, "Just do it, man." His eyes widen as though he's warning Mike of something without actually telling him what the threat is.

In a flash, he's speeding back down the hallway; passing by Mike and his own locker.

(Doesn't he have class? Don't they all?)

"Michael!" It's Dustin now, and he's coming from whence Lucas just

went.

Blinking, Mike inhales a breath, "Yeah?"

"We need to hide!"

Suddenly, El appears behind him, and she has a hand clutching the boy's sweater to keep up.

"What, why?" Mike folds his arms over his chest, a scowl on his face as his gaze flickers back and forth between the pair when they arrive in front of him. El looks rattled, unsettled, almost kind of impatient. "What happened? Are you okay?" He reaches a hand out to touch her arm in a comforting gesture, but before he can there's a palm pressed flat against his spine and he's stumbling forward, right into El.

"Just shut up and haul ass!" Dustin pushes a hand against Mike's back then, shoving the taller boy forward and into the girl's body, "Run for your life, player!" The boy practically yells, bouncing up and down on his feet before taking off running himself, Nike sneakers sliding along the tiled floors with the faintest of screeches.

"What the f-"

Suddenly, Mike's hand is being tugged at, and he looks down to see El wrapping her other hand around his forearm. "Quickly." Her head lowers but her eyes remain on his. "My dad's here."

Mike sighs, and it takes him all of (maybe) three seconds to link his fingers through hers and just follow her lead.

"This is ridiculous." He grumbles as she's pulling him down the hallway, and he can faintly make out her reply of '*shh*'.

To say he nearly trips over his own feet at least twice would be an understatement, and by the time she's shoving him through a door, Mike has given up caring who sees them.

He never signed up for this, for dodging their classmates (and parents, apparently) and sneaking around like a couple of spies with targets on their backs.

"Okay." El breathes out, and she uncurls her hand from his arm to rest it on her hip as she bends over to catch her breath.

Glancing around, Mike frowns, and his teeth bare, "Why are we in the girls' room?"

El shrugs, nonchalant and cool now, but Mike can tell even she's not sure of her own answer, "Because it's safe in here."

He snorts, but manages the faintest of smiles, "How is this *safe*?" His shoulders raise then, and his brows curve in amusement. He's not gonna complain about getting a moment alone with her — even if it means her dad finds him and hangs him up by his boxers out front. "If anything, this will just land me in detention. The AV room is safer," he reasons, stepping closer.

"You're not gonna end up in detention," El says, and she's so confident this time that Mike doesn't know what to reply. She takes a couple of steps closer to him, pushing him backwards and further into the room.

By some miracle, all of the stalls are unoccupied, and Mike wonders if she scouted the room out beforehand. She couldn't have because she'd been- Actually, what *had* she been doing?

"What are you doing?" He grins, lets her shove him against the back wall. He turns his head to the side to read a small scribble of *'Fellatio by Felicia. Call me.'* on the wall beside him, and Mike snorts, "The wrong bathroom, for starters."

El raises the side of his face pressed to the wall with her fingertips then, and she leans up on her toes to press her lips against the corner of his mouth, "Shut up."

"Are you just *not* gonna tell me why your dad's here?" Mike asks, and he pushes up on his feet so his back is straight. His knees click, and he lowers a hand to her waist as she nuzzles herself closer, nose against his throat.

"You're smarter than most, Mike. You *know* why." She explains, fingers tugging on the ends of the drawstrings keeping his hoodie

loose. "I don't want him to find out it's you." El closes her eyes and she drops her forehead to rest against his collarbones. "I don't want anyone to find out."

He would be offended if he didn't understand, sympathise.

"Why not?"

"Because then they'd realise how amazing you are and I'd lose you," El speaks into the skin of his neck, tugging on the collar of the rugby shirt that's tucked away beneath his hoodie. She pulls on the white strings again, anxiously twisting them around her fingers.

"I don't think anyone's gonna find me amazing when you refer to me as Waffle Boy as a term of endearment." He tells her, "Like, you could have at least put 'Waffle Wheeler' or something."

"Waffle Boy's cute." The brunette says, and she ducks her heads, raises her eyes in such a way that Mike just *knows* her opinion isn't going to change. "It's mine."

"Does that make *me* yours?"

Grinning, El pushes up again, and she presses her mouth against his jaw, "What do you think?" Just as she quirks in brow in suggestion, there's loud movement coming from behind the door to the restrooms.

Before she can react, Mike grabs her by the waist and he kicks open the door to the final stall, the old bolts of the door shrieking as he pulls it closed. He presses her up against the door, her fuzzy pink sweater glowing against the old paint of the wood.

Outside, the main door has flung open, and the distinct sound of sneakers squelching against the floor tiles has El placing her hand over Mike's mouth. She stares up at him with blinking eyes, and she can practically feel it when he swallows a deep breath, Adam's apple bobbing in worry.

On the one end, he doesn't see the point in any of this. They were never exactly *hiding* their relationship, it just wasn't like it needed to be public knowledge to begin with. So, theoretically, he could just

walk out right now and let whoever is out there know that it's him, that's he's the secret boyfriend — or, as he heard someone in the chem lab refer to him as earlier, *lover boy* — that everyone's been trying to identify for the better part of six hours.

It's stupid really. They're seventeen and eighteen, and they should be allowed to just *be*. But since someone took it upon themselves to invade his girlfriend's personal life, to post their private messages online for the entire school to see and turn everything into some kind of puzzle... Mike can't just come clean without everyone either A) congratulating him or B) mocking him.

If he comes clean, reveals himself to be the soon-to-be-infamous 'Waffle Boy' that everyone is so curious about, then suddenly he's on everyone's radar and every single person who thought they understood El's relationship is gonna be watching him like a hawk.

But if he stays silent and he keeps his head down, then their relationship can remain private — or, well, at least as much as it still can given they've had private conversations published for all of maybe three hundred curious teens (and counting) to see.

(It's such bullshit.)

And, truth be told, he's not big on the idea of just emerging from the girls' toilets and exposing his identity to a couple of cheerleaders. He'll settle for pretending he doesn't know who his girlfriend's boyfriend is.

And he knows they're cheerleaders because their sneakers make a nightmarish squeak that's distinctly familiar — and also because Stacey's voice has been grating his last nerve since middle school... and she's the last person he wants finding out about this.

"Can you believe it though?" The sound of something plastic being placed on the counter fills the silence and then water runs, and Stacey is talking again, "Plain little Jane scored herself a Romeo."

(Mike would laugh if he could. He settles for a grin.)

"You almost sound jealous."

"I'm not jealous." A pause. "I'm just curious."

"We're all curious. It's cute... and kinda fun."

"This isn't fun," Stacey says, and suddenly the tap is turned off, "I just wanna know who the guy is so we can go back to forgetting they even exist."

"If you didn't want people to care then maybe you shouldn't have stolen her phone," Jennifer starts, mumbling, "and posted everything online."

At that, Mike pulls El's hand off of his mouth.

Her!

His eyes darken, and he glances down at his girlfriend for approximately two seconds before he's moving her aside and aiming for the lock. But before he can even reach it, El is pressing up on her tiptoes, lips roughly pushing against his to silence him. He makes a noise then, some kind of groan-slash-mumble escaping at the shock.

He's no longer interested in the girls' conversation; they could be calling him all sorts of names and he wouldn't even care because El is kissing him again — for the first time today — and her lips taste of raspberry.

El's hand pushes against his chest, fingertips splayed out across his sternum and Mike takes his queue to back up against the wall again. He's pretty sure his collision with the graffiti-covered wall made some sort of noise but, truth be told, he couldn't care less. El is running her tongue along his lower lip, seducing him into silence and (well, *damn it!*) it's working.

Sure, making out in the girls' restrooms wasn't on his list of things to do today, but he's not gonna deny her this.

When El runs her hands up his neck to clasp them behind him, Mike takes the opportunity to bring her closer. He wraps his arms around her frame, pulling her into his chest and earning a small moan of appreciation in return. He pulls away momentarily to breathe her in and savor the dazed look on her face, the taste of her chapstick on his

lips.

But then she licks her lips, and he drags his teeth across his bottom one, and El is attacking his mouth again. Not wasting another second, he slides a hand down her side, palm meeting the curve of her backside to urge her forward. Her hands move to cup his face, thumbs warm against his cheekbones. The ball of her hands press into his jawline, and Mike is pretty sure his face is gonna turn purple from the sheer force of her kiss.

(God, she's intoxicating!)

It doesn't occur to him that girls are, by nature, curious... Not until his eyes flicker open in a moment of weakness and he's making direct eye contact with Jennifer Hayes of all people.

(Shit.)

El

Hands still pressed against Mike's shoulders, El lets her head drop. She leans into the boy, pressing up on her toes again so she can easily nuzzle in against his neck.

"Do you think she-

"I don't know," El mumbles, quickly, and she snuggles deeper into his chest, hands clutching at the material of his hoodie to bring it closer.

(The earth could swallow her up whole right now and she wouldn't pose a complaint.)

(She'd be quite happy if the world ended and she died in Mike's embrace.)

"I think we can leave now, you know." Mike breathes, and she squeezes her eyes shut tighter at the warmth of his breath against the top of his head. "It's probably safe."

"You're right," she starts, but she doesn't let go of him or even loosen her grip, "but I don't want to."

"You want to stay in here all day?"

El smiles, voice muffled by the cotton of his top, "For the rest of my life."

"That might be a little unsanitary." Mike jokes, and he wraps a hand around her right forearm, skin hot to the touch. El almost gasps. "Come on."

Forcing herself to stand upright, El takes a step away. She smooths her hands down her front, then up in her hair. It's noticeably messier so she brushes through the curls with a sigh, "Why do we have to leave?"

"Because we're still in high school and we can't move into the girls' restrooms just because you want to," he tells her, readjusting the hood of his sweatshirt. Mike grins, cheeks rose and lips stained red from her chapstick, "Maybe after we've graduated."

"You wanna live with me?" El asks, and she moves to pull the hairband from Mike's wrist. He lets her pull it off with a smile, watching as she pulls short hair up.

"Well, I don't wanna live *without* you."

"Romantic." She presses a hand to his chest, rolls her eyes when he grabs it, brings it up to his lips, and kisses it.

"And everyone knows it," Mike whispers, almost below his breath. He reaches past her to unlock the stall door then, letting her walk out first. The rest of the room is still empty, but El glances around hurriedly anyway.

"I'll go and then you," she trails off, and Mike nods.

"Oh. Umm, yeah," he lets go of her hand and then shoves both of his own into the pockets of his hoodie, "that's probably better." There's a moment of silence then, and just as she turns to leave, she finds him tugging on her hand, spinning her around one last time. He presses a fleeting kiss to her lips, hands keeping to himself. El sighs in satisfaction, and in displeasure at having to end it.

She presses him away with a soft push against his chest, and she whips back around to leave before he can stop her again.

Fortunately, there's nobody waiting for her outside the restrooms. Half-convinced Jennifer and Stacey would have been waiting for her with shit-eating grins and their perfectly coifed updos, El is relieved to find the hallway deserted. It looks clear, and she has half a mind to just usher Mike out right behind her.

But then someone calls her name, and she literally *freezes*.

"El?"

(No.)

"Dad?"

3. three

Brows raised in surprise, El gulps before breaking the tense silence, "Dad?"

"Hey, kid." Rolling up his sleeves with a sideways look down the hall, Hopper steps closer to his daughter. "Something you want to tell me?"

The color drains from the girl's face then, her cheeks turning a sickly white color. Her shoulders lift as she moves to cross her arms, "No." She shrugs, offering a casual, "It's nice to see you, though."

Hopper simply rolls his eyes, "Don't bullshit me, El. I've seen the papers."

El looks down and spots the corner of a bright yellow sheet of paper sticking out from his pocket then, "Right." She licks her lips, eyes widening as she goes to explain, "It's not... real."

"So you don't have a boyfriend?"

Just then, Jennifer Hayes breezes past her, speedily running out from the gymnasium. The blonde is heading straight for the girls' toilets (where Mike has yet to emerge from), and she mumbles a quick, "Duty calls," to El before she forces the door open.

The door was already slightly open (El notes) and, if she tried hard enough, El probably could have made out a flash of black hair emerging from passed the doorway.

But Jennifer seems to shove someone (definitely Mike) backward, and she kicks the door shut behind her.

(She's not entirely sure how Jennifer knew—that Mike was seconds away from giving himself up—but the girl is an actual angel.)

(Was she waiting nearby? Had she seen Mike coming out of the bathroom from all the way down the hall? Did she *tell* anybody?)

Attention snapping back to her dad, El frowns at the look of confusion on his face. He's staring at the space behind her, where

Jennifer has just disappeared to. If he's curious, he doesn't say anything. But he looks suspicious, which...

"Well, I mean... *That* part is real but—"

Hopper sighs, and he pulls the paper from his front pocket to wave it in her face—if paper could laugh, it would be *cackling*. "Because your brother says you sent these."

El snags the sheet from his hand then, balling it up in her fist. "My *step*-brother is dead," she says through gritted teeth, a forced smile etched onto her face. "And he's unreliable."

"Just tell me why someone posted them, El. I'm not gonna ground you for having a boyfriend." He grumbles, "Jesus, give me more credit than that." Hopper eyes the yellow paper in her fist, thick eyebrows wiggling animatedly. "I thought I was kind of a cool dad, you know, but I guess... I guess you'd rather tell the whole school before your old man," he says, and she can just *tell* that he's being dramatic and looking for some kind of reassurance.

(Yeah, you're a cool dad. Don't worry, you're totally chill. Dad, you're the literal *best*.)

El just throws her head back, a groan slipping past her lips. "You know I would have told you first—" she cuts herself off, blinking, "It was out of my control."

"Whose control was it *in* then?"

She's never been one for ratting people out, and she's not going to start now—even if it means selling out the girl(s) who did this to her. She'd rather just deal with it herself than have her dad intervene. The last thing she needs right now is to be labeled a rat.

El purses her lips, looking down to her closed fist, "I have no idea." She scrunches the flyer up a little bit more and stuffs it into her back pocket. Brows raising up to her hairline, she offers her dad a slight smile, "Can we let it go?"

Hopper just stares down at his daughter, an authoritative look on his face, "No," he says, steadfast. "Did you forget that I'm a detective?"

"You're a small town police chief. The only thing you need to investigate is why our donuts all somehow taste like bread," El mocks him with a snicker.

Laying a hand on his daughter's shoulder, Hopper leans down to look her in the eye. "I'm *detecting* that you're full of shit, kiddo." He pats her upper arm, a grin half-hidden beneath his full mustache, "Come on, I've set up the gym."

(Wait.)

El's eyes almost bulge out of her head then, "Set it up for *what*?"

"I know we don't know each that well but," Jennifer moves to push her hair behind her ears then, head tilting thoughtfully, "you really need to just shut up and listen to me."

"Are you serious?" Mike's brows raise up his forehead, and he folds his arms over his chest disbelievably, "You're gonna trap me in here?"

Shaking her head, Jennifer just presses her back against the door to the girls' toilets, a hand wrapping around the handle to make sure it doesn't budge, "I'm doing you a favor, Wheeler." She crosses her legs over each other, cheeks puffing out as she sucks in a breath.

Why?" Mike scowls, somewhat distrusting the girl's intentions. Sure, she hadn't sold him out *before* but... "Besides, I'm gonna have to leave at some point, you know," he points out as though it isn't obvious.

It is, and the way the cheerleader just mimics him with a roll of her eyes just confirms it, "I know that. But your *secret* girlfriend's dad, who just so happens to be the *chief of police* is right outside, so unless you want castrating in the middle of the school hallway, you should probably give it five minutes." Jennifer leans back against the door, thick ponytail pressed into the wood almost painfully, "Trust me."

Breathing a heavy sigh, Mike just lets his shoulders slump. His hands fall to his sides, palms swiping against the outside of the thighs as he shakes his head, mumbling, "This is a joke."

The blonde quirks a brow, "What is?"

"This," and Mike gestures a hand about then, face twisting in irritation, "This whole... thing. It's so pointless."

Jennifer watches as he backs up to the other side of the room, sliding down the wall until he's sat on the floor. Mike stretches his legs out in front of him, ankles crossing as his hands fall to his lap, fingers fidgety.

(Maybe it's not her place, but...)

"Not to say 'I told you so' because, well, I've never really told you *anything*, and vice-versa... but maybe you should have just been open with your relationship." She approaches him with small steps then, hands politely (and tentatively) clasped behind her back. Her ponytail sways as she walks, and her sneakers *squelch* as she twists and turns to sit down beside him on the floor.

Jennifer pulls the skirt of her outfit down her thighs, tucking it between her legs as she crosses them, comfortably resting her elbows on the insides of her knees. She tilts her head to the side, eyeing the boy in curiosity.

"We weren't *not*." Mike finally says after a moment, and his shoulders rise and fall in a sigh, "We just *were*, and now other people are getting involved and it's just weird."

The blonde nods, thoughtfully gnawing at her bottom lip for a second. Then her lips smack together and apart, and she scrunches her nose, "Stacey thinks you're hot."

Mike snorts at that, and he rests his head back against chipped tiles. His eyes close, and Jennifer can tell he's trying to contain his laughter because a weird hiccup escapes his past his lips and he shakes black hair into his face.

She nudges his arm with her shoulder then, offering a simple, "Well, she thinks you *sound* hot, at least."

Mike shrugs, shooting her a look out of the corner of his eye, "That's not helping, you know."

"You should take it as a compliment," she suggests, eyes widening in amusement, "Not many guys can pull off what you did,"

The tall boy frowns, "Cowardice?"

"I don't think you're a coward for not wanting people to meddle in your relationship. That's human. It's just, you know, that a lot of people *like* being defined by their personal lives, especially people *our* age." A pause, "There's nothing wrong with not wanting everyone to know your business."

"But it's kind of strange, right?" Mike's brows furrow softly, and his voice lowers (hesitantly), "that we're not openly affectionate or whatever."

The girl hums, "I mean... I don't think so, for whatever that's worth. It's just not what *we the youth of today* tend to do," she explains with a grin. "Practically all the guys on the basketball team do is flaunt their so-called conquests so, believe me, it's refreshing how you *don't* want people knowing every little sordid detail of your sex life."

"Jesus," Mike sighs, but there's a small smile threatening to take over his features and Jennifer kind of wants it to—if only so she can feel proud at having gotten it out of him. "*Sex life*. Because apparently, I have one of those." He smooths the sides of his hands along his thighs, looking over at the girl to find her smirking to herself now, "Does everyone think we're, like, doing it like rabbits or—"

"No!" The cheerleader cuts him off quickly, a hand flying about to stop him from finishing his sentence, "God, no. Just... Well, I now get the impression we might have taken some of your conversations out of context."

The corners of Mike's mouth pull up then, almost smugly, "The downside of being an outsider to someone else's life."

"That's not necessarily a bad thing." She reasons, "I mean, no offense, but I'd rather *not* know what you guys get up to," Mike just shrugs, understanding, "And, besides, you got, like *half* the student body to fall in love with you because of what you wrote, whether it was intentionally suggestive or not. That's something."

He shrugs, "I mean... If you say so."

"I do," Jennifer says, confident, "and you made the captain of the cheer squad *jealous* of your girlfriend. That's pretty funny to think about."

Mike snickers, countering, "Because I'm such a loser? I'll try not to be too insulted, but thanks."

"Because she's up on her high-horse thinking she's better than everyone when really all she wants is someone to want her. And knowing who you are would just make her *crazy*—if she can't even get *Mike Wheeler*, then... I mean, she's my friend and all, but she could do with being knocked down a peg or two. No offense."

"Max would knock her down five pegs if you'd let her."

"I'm sure she would." Jennifer smiles, cheeks puffing out once again as she sighs longingly. After a beat, she whispers, "Hey, can I ask you something?"

Mike clears his throat, pulling his knees up to his chest and wrapping long arms around them. His sleeves bunch around his elbows as he eyes the girl in curiosity, "I mean, I'd say we've got another five minutes to spare and you've helped me in a way, so... yeah." He offers the girl a smile, kind and grateful, "What is it?"

"It's about your friend," suddenly her cheeks are two shades redder and she's avoiding his gaze, "Henderson?"

"This has gotta be, like, a criminal offense or something," Max says, pulling on the straps of her backpack. The bag tightens around her front, the zip sitting just past her exposed collarbones. "Right? Like, what kind of cop holds a bunch of kids against their will?"

"The shady kind."

"One with a kid himself?" Lucas quips.

"It's not like it would matter anyway," Dustin shrugs, "He's like... the *Chief*, you know?" He squints, as though he's unsure his point got

across.

"Yeah, I got it." Max glares over at him, peering around Lucas. Her boyfriend is sat between them both, and she nuzzles rests her head on his shoulder with a sigh. "Idiot."

Feeling her breath against his neck, Lucas peers down at the grumbling redhead. She's got her arms folded over her chest (so, over her backpack), and there's a perpetual frown on her face. Lucas grins, pulling an earbud from his ear to offer it to her. "Daily mix?"

Glancing up, Max plucks the earbud from his long fingers with a smile and the smallest of nods. She holds it up to her right ear, nuzzling unto her boyfriend's side.

"Hey, where is Will anyway?" Lucas digs his elbows into his jeans then, leaning forward to get a better view of the crowd.

"I don't know," Max purses her lips, brows furrowing in confusion, "I haven't seen him since earlier."

"He was with Brett before we came in here," Dustin tells them, "I didn't see them come in though."

"They're probably just ditching. I don't blame them." The girl says. She blinks, forcing out a loud, fake yawn, "Anyway... was me up if someone dies or something, Hendy."

Dustin just mumbles something below his breath, and he kicks his legs out in front of him. Only, he stretches just a little bit too far, and the front of his Converse are pressing into the back of a bigger, wider, *stronger* teen, and the boy is now looking back at Dustin with a scowl and a half. "Shit."

Quickly bringing his legs back into his own space, the curly-haired teen holds both hands up apologetically. He wiggles his fingers, eyes blowing wide as his bottom lip puckers out like a child, "Sorry, man."

Max feigns a cough then, fist clenched around her mouth, smug, "Loser."

"Go screw a snowman, ice queen!"

Max gasps; half in mock surprise, half in disbelief that he'd even think such a lame jab would win him the argument. "How *dare* you?"

"Dude, can you watch your damn mouth?" Lucas interjects.

"Can I watch my mouth?" Dustin mocks, "You're not my mom."

"If he was, maybe you wouldn't be such a pussy!"

"I'm not a pussy! I just haven't had my shot yet—"

Max cackles at that, hands fidgeting with the cable hanging from her ear, "Your shot?"

"Yes! You know I need to take my meds with lunch!"

Max grins, and the little smile on her friend's face doesn't go unnoticed, "You sound like a crazy person!"

"Well, it takes one to know one, Mayfield!"

"Fuck you, Curly Fry!"

Reaching over Lucas, Dustin aims for the girl's arm. He presses his thumb and forefinger together, set on pinching her bicep. But the slightly taller boy between them cuts him off, back of his hand landing flat against Dustin's chest with a slightest of thumps.

"Dude, just sit still and quit causing shit," Lucas scolds him, full glare in tow when the other boy just scoffs, accidentally elbowing him in the process, "Jesus!"

"What?"

Max groans, throwing her head back, "Shut up, the both of you!"

"Hey!"

Realizing the voice doesn't belong to any of them, the trio turn their attention to the middle of the room.

Hopper's stood with his hands on his hips, uninformed and authoritative. His brows are raised, right up to his hairline—balding

from stress, Max notes—and his five o'clock shadow is somehow looking pretty frazzled.

The teens watch as he taps his fingers against the thighs of his trousers, clicking his tongue as he stares up at them, impatient. "Are you done?"

Lucas nods, Dustin shrugs, and Max can't help but smirk. It's not because of the Chief though. No, she's smirking because right there in the middle of the high school is one Jane Ives Hopper, sat on a stool like a modern day, virgin Hester Prynne.

(Is she the *only* one that knows El and Mike's sex life is actually virtually non-existent? Probably.)

And it's the irony that makes Max smirk (and, well, she also kind of chuckles until she gets a thump in her side from her boyfriend.)

"Sorry." Max clears her throat, eyes darting from the policeman to his daughter. The brunette's awkwardly shuffling her feet along the polished basketball court, worn soles right on the bright yellow outline of a tiger's face, gaze lowered as she grips the stool with white-knuckled fists.

(Goddamn you, *Hawkins Tigers*.)

"You're sure about this?"

Will takes a moment to consider his options, eyeing the lighter in one hand and the bright red, almost *daring* sign in front of him. Then, he nods, confident, and he shoots Brett a look out of the corner of his eye.

"Definitely."

"We can't go back." The taller teen tells him, scraping the toe of his shoes against tiled flooring. He rubs his hands together conspiratorially, blond hair flipping back. The muscles in his neck tighten, and his jaw clenches, "If they catch us..."

"We're doing it. Well... *I'm* doing it, with or without you." Will

confirms, and he runs his hand through his hair before swallowing down a heavy breath, "He's lost it." He stares warily up at his boyfriend, referring to his stepdad, "Trust me, we're just doing everyone a favor."

Brett nods, and he rests a comforting hand on the shorter boy's arm, "Okay. Then I trust you." He squeezes Will's forearm, touch lingering, "But if this goes up in flames..."

"Pun intended?"

Brett grins, "Of course."

Alright," Hopper slips his hands from behind his back to massage his jaw, dark eyes shifting over the faces of several dozen teens, "Which one of you little shits was it?"

"You can't talk to us like that!"

Hopper lowers his arms then, unfolding them from his chest as he approaches the boy who just spoke. "Yeah?" He narrows his eyes, leaning down to the kid's level. "You got something to tell me?"

The blond boy squirms under his gaze, arms tightening around his frame as his legs squeeze. He looks up at the man with an innocent look on his face, eyes squinting as if he wants nothing more than to close them or get as far away from the chief as he can. "No, sir. Nope." He shakes his head, "Not me."

"How about you just sit there and stay quiet then, huh?" Hopper stands up straight again to stare down at the group of teenagers directly before him. He eyes them considerably for a moment, letting his gaze sweep over their many faces, features, traumatized and yet puzzled expressions. Then he takes in the whole audience at his disposition with a sigh and a soft pinch of his nose.

(Maybe assembling the whole senior grade in one place hadn't been the smartest decision.)

(He should have just questioned them separately.)

(But oh, well...)

Hopper cracks his knuckles, walking back into the center of the gym again. He resumes his place from before, hands on his hips with an air of authority.

"Anybody?" He pushes his tongue into his cheek, breathing heavily with flared nostrils. "I've got all day."

"Well, we don't." One nasally girl in the back calls out, and she immediately stands up to catch his eye. She has long brown hair pulled into an up-do, and there's a noticeably dicy tone to her voice.

Stacey.

Behind her father, El squirms in her seat — he'd made her sit on a stool in the middle of the gymnasium, in front of all of her peers like some kind of martyr.

(And, please, like the humiliation of having her private texts published for everyone to see wasn't embarrassment enough. Now her dad is getting in on the action.)

"Maybe if your daughter hadn't been such a slut, then she wouldn't have been hacked."

There's an awkward silence (aside from some *oohs* and *ahhs*) that follows her words, and El would be running up those steps to wring her neck right now if her dad hadn't beat her to it.

"Say that to me one more time," Hopper demands, blinks, and out of the corner of his eye, he spots the principal standing up, in case he needs to intervene. But the police chief simply waves a hand about, silently telling the man to stay put. He squares back in on Stacey, who's got a petulant scowl on her face now, "You sound like you have some juicy information."

("Please, God, don't say juicy ever again", El pleads with a look up to the ceiling.)

"Information?" Stacey crosses her arms, feigning disinterest. Her eyes roll, almost all the way to the back of her hair, and she purses her

lips with a swing of her ponytail, "Please, I'm just as curious as you are, sir." She holds a hand up to her heart, bats her eyelashes with a glance down to her peers, "The sooner we get this resolved, the sooner I can go back to being top dog."

"Top dog?" El snickers under breath, pulling the top of her t-shirt up to her nose to mask her laugh. She brings her knees up onto the stool, wrapping her arms around them as her face falls against her thighs, brows raised in bemusement, "Sure."

"I mean, no offense, but your daughter isn't exactly popular. This is obviously just some stunt so she can gain a little notoriety around school."

"Are you *serious*?" comes a voice from down the other end of the bleachers now, and every single person in the room whips around to see who dared speak up.

There's a redhead stood up, hands on her hips as she glares across at the other girl. Hopper knows who she is, so when Max opens her mouth to start talking again, he doesn't see fit to cut her off. She's got this.

"Why are you such a sk—"

Just then, the doors to the gym fly wide open, and Hopper quickly turns around to see two more kids enter the room.

One of them is who he knows to be the daughter of his divorce attorney, a girl by the name of Jennifer Hayes. She's got a skip in her step and grin on her face, blonde hair freely flying in the air as she approaches the bleachers. She casually walks around him with a small, almost bashful smile on her face.

A few feet behind her is one Michael 'Mike' Wheeler.

Hopper knows him as one of El's best friends, if not her *oldest* friend—in age and sentiment. The boy's several months older, and about a whole foot taller, than his daughter. Whenever he's seen Mike, it's either been with El or Will or any combination of their other friends. With black hair and long limbs and wide brown eyes, Hopper's pretty

sure the kid had been El's first crush.

(Granted, she never told him as much. But he'd walked in on them once—and they'd been roughly around eight years old at the time—kissing. Well, it hadn't been *kissing*, exactly. More like, El had gripped the boy's shoulders and let him peck her on the lips fleetingly, as little kids do, and then she'd run up the stairs with a hand over her mouth and a pretty red tint to her cheeks.)

(Hopper's not entirely sure what happened to their relationship; why childhood sweetness hadn't blossomed into young romance, but given the way Mike is following after the Hayes girl with a guilty look on his face, Hopper's pretty sure that he's *not* El's boyfriend.)

(And it's a shame really because Mike Wheeler is one of, maybe, six teenagers that Hopper doesn't mind.)

The man watches as Mike trails his feet along the floor, hands stuffed in his front pockets and gnawing at his bottom lip. His eyebrows are raised up as though he's surprised by the number of people gathered in the gym, and he glances over at El to shoot her a smile, friendly and reassuring, Hopper notes. And then the kid—he'd have a lot less trouble calling him that if he didn't rival him in height—meets the chief's eye and his smile dips ever so slightly. He nods his head in acknowledgment of the man, shoulders slumped, and Hopper can all but return the gesture as Mike takes a spot on the lower bleacher.

"You," Hopper points toward the brunette from earlier, and he clicks his tongue as he reaches for his belt. He slides his thumb through the front loop of his pants, tugging, "I'm assuming you own a printer?"

"Yeah..."

He nods, "So you're admitting it then?"

"Admitting what?"

"That you printed out those messages."

"What, just because I have an office in my house, I'm suddenly a whistleblower?" Stacey squeaks.

"Dad," El mumbles his name, gritting her teeth with a look in Mike's direction. He's sat beside the blond kid from earlier, and the boy (who is now wearing a beanie pulled down to his eyebrows) is, to put it plainly, watching him. It's like he *knows* Mike is up to something but he can't quite put his finger on it.

(She needs to end this before any more people catch on.)

"Dad!"

Hopper groans, turning around to face his daughter, "What?" He snaps.

"Can you just... not do this right now?"

"El, sweetie," he starts, fingers linking together with a sigh, "you know how I work—"

As he's about to finish his sentence, the fire alarm is ringing out throughout the whole school. The noise causes an uproar, and so before Hopper can even assess and control the situation, there's a sudden swarm of teenagers heading straight for the exits, and straight for him.

Hopper's hand fly up to his ears to drown out the sound of the alarm and panicked teens rushing about, and just as he goes to locate his daughter in the midst of the rush, he finds her stool tipped over and empty. The yellow note has slipped from her pocket and is lying crumpled on the floor, ready to be trampled on by her frenzied peers.

Glancing around, Hopper quickly starts guiding kids towards the exit. He's the chief after all; his priority *has* to be the safety of his town and its residents. He starts waving his hands about, ushering kids forward and copying the principal.

But less than a five seconds later, over the crowd, he spots a brown head of hair pushing through the doors. Only, she's heading for the left side of the building instead of the right (as she should), and there's a tall black-haired figure next to her. He identifies the other person as the Wheeler kid, and Hopper watches as the two teens separate from the rest of the group. Either they're stupidly walking

straight into the line of fire, or they know something Hopper doesn't.

(It's definitely the latter.)

(He follows.)

Turns out, the whole thing had been a hoax. The fire alarm that is, not the total invasion of his daughter's privacy. Within a matter of twenty minutes,

Well, *some kids*. Hopper's not an idiot, and he knows just who was responsible.

(There's a reason Will, three minutes from now, will come running out of the back building with urgency.)

Slipping through the doors that lead out onto the football field, Hopper watches as the pair of teens in front of him around the corner of the building, heading straight past the run track. They've been roaming around the school for a good ten minutes, arm in arm.

They're making a beeline for the back of the school building now, and just when Hopper thinks he can catch up, they quicken their pace and run straight out into the parking lot reserved for students.

Licking his lips, Hopper stands back as his daughter shuffles between a bunch of cars, sticking close to the boy in front of her, hands on his shoulders as though he's guiding her to some form of safety.

(Whatever she's up to, it almost certainly has something to do with Mike Wheeler.)

(Hopper's just not sure *what* they're doing yet.)

El ducks behind a large black van then, and she vanishes for all of (maybe) five seconds before he sees her again. She's sat on the hood of a car, knees pulled up to her chin, and Mike is stood by the passenger side door, shoving his backpack inside.

Across the way, Hopper spots the rest of their friend group making their way over to them. The redhead is a waving a hand about,

mobile phone clutched between her fingers.

"Lovebirds!"

(These kids would be in so much shit if he wasn't so worried about his daughter's well being.)

(Wait... hold on.)

(Lovebirds?!)

Pressing his side to the brick wall, Hopper brings his hat up to his face. He replaces it back on his head, pulling it into place by his fingertips until his eyes are almost covered.

El holds up a finger in front of her mouth, as though to silence her friends, and Sinclair throws his hands up defensively. He shifts his shoulders back, wrapping an arm around his girlfriend's shoulder as their approach the other two.

Whatever they're saying, Hopper can't quite make out. But he stays observing them for a solid ten minutes, standing in the shadows as his daughter interacts with her friends. Their other friend joins them after a moment, and his stepson eventually appears out of nowhere, and one of them even ends up getting a punch square in the jaw.

(But, nine minutes later, when Mike Wheeler pulls a small stack of Eggo waffles from his backpack and hands them over to El with care...)

(Well, his suspicions are confirmed.)

(Hopper can't help but smile, and walk away knowing she's going to be alright.)

"Take it."

"For real?"

Could-Be-Matt pulls down the edge of his beanie with one hand, the other extending out to Dustin. He loosens his grip of the items in his

hand, fingers wiggling. "Just take the damn thing, Henderson."

Cautiously, Dustin reaches for the stick and lighter. He ponders his next move for a moment, nose scrunching as his breath catches in his throat, uncertain.

"Do I have to?"

"No." Could-Be-Matt shrugs, careless enough for Dustin to just up and run if he wanted to. His brows dip between his nose, eyes closing. "But *I* know something you might want to know." He says, cryptically raising a brow.

The other boy pulls a face, upper lip sticking to his gums as he contemplates Matt's offer. He clenches the items in his fist then, skeptic, "What does it concern?"

"Your friend and," he pauses, thinking, "your *other* friend." Could-Be-Matt grins, boyish and childlike. Green eyes blink wide open, and he licks his lips as his hands move to clasp behind his back, "Turns out I'm, like, a detection or whatever."

"A *detective*?"

"Yeah, that." The blond boy nods, grin slipping from his face as it fades to a simple smile, "It was so easy." He boasts, proud of himself.

(How the f— did *he* figure it out?)

Just then, Could-Be-Matt pulls a piece of paper from his jacket pocket, orange and eye-popping. He opens it up and untucks folded edges, holding it out for Dustin to take, too. The boy snatches it quickly, keeping the lighter and joint in his other hand. Matt has circled a couple of texts in green highlighter, but there's a pen-drawn star beside one of El's outgoing messages.

Good job you've got Wheels then, huh?

Dustin reads the text aloud, the realization that *it's been there all along* suddenly hitting him.

(Oh, if only Stacey hadn't been *such* an idiot.)

Clearing his throat, Dustin quirks a brow, "You planning on telling people?"

"Nah," Could-Be-Matt snuffles, glancing around the deserted hallway.

He'd caught Dustin right outside of the school entrance when everyone had been making their way back inside. He'd pulled him aside and thrust a joint and an ultimatum in his face.

"I kinda like being in on it." He grins.

Dustin frowns at that, "You know you've just *freely* given up valid information, right?"

"Eh." He grabs Dustin's hand then, opening it up to reveal the smoke and the used lighter. "Offer's still on the table, Hendy."

El, you need to tell your brother to chill." Lucas calls out to the girl upon approaching, scratching the back of his neck as he eyes the phone the phone in Max's hands. "He almost burnt down the school."

"No, he didn't." Max rolls her eyes, thrusting her phone forward to show the brunette. She pulls up Will's message — ***I think I did sthg? Head out back now!*** — and quirks a brow in surprise, "He, like, went off." She snaps her fingers then, shooting Mike a bland look, "Waffle Boy."

The tallest teen just fakes a laugh, teeth-baring as the corners of his eyes wrinkle in contempt "Funny." He slurs, leaning back against his car.

"Just stating the facts."

Behind Max, there's a sudden cry of "Abort! Abort!" and the group whips around to see Dustin hurling toward them, practically stumbling over his own feet. His hands fly out in front of him, and when he reaches the car beside Mike's, he drops down onto the ground with a heavy sigh.

"Jesus!" He shouts, throwing his head back, "Fuck!"

Mike kicks him in the butt, scowling, "Keep your voice down!"

Dustin just sits upright, back against the wheel-trim of the Volvo behind him. He licks his lips, dry and panting, "Sure thing, Waffle Boy."

"Are you all gonna steal my nickname now?"

"Obviously." Lucas nods, casual as his arms cross over his chest. His cheeks puff out as he takes in his friend's slumped form on the ground; Dustin's pulling on the side of his hoodie, making the flaps bat open wide. "Man, what happened now?"

"I almost got roped into Williams' class." He breathes, still out of breath, "Can you believe that?" He grumbles with a melodramatic tut, "As if!"

"I mean, we do *have* class." Mike points out, earning a glare from everybody beside El, who simply nods in agreement. "Unless we... don't?"

"That's more like it, Lurch." Max cheers, clapping a hand on the boy's arm. She glances over his shoulder to look at El, but instead catches sight of Will in the background. "Our hero!"

"Shh." Will plasters a hand over her mouth, wide brown eyes staring back at her. "I don't wanna get expelled."

Max mumbles something into his skin, but when he doesn't pull his hand back, she kicks it up a notch and licks his palm.

Will flinches, quickly removing his hand and eyeing the wet patch of skin, "What the heck?"

"Right back at you, Byers. Why are your hands so sweaty?" She rubs her lips, grimacing, "Gnarly."

"Maybe you shouldn't go around licking people." Mike tells her, fingers tight around his biceps, "You know, then you wouldn't get spit on you."

Max tosses hair over her shoulder, setting her eyes on the lanky boy.

"Oh, whatever—" She stops talking then; an arm stretched out to wave in his face rudely, she'd underestimated the distance between their bodies, and suddenly her half-clenched fist was colliding with the side of Mike's face.

Her knuckles drag across his sharp jaw, bone on bone, and she can feel his chin lightly *crunch* under the force of her blow.

"Jesus!" Dustin exclaims!

"Shit!" Mike yelps, right hand flying out to clutch his face. He runs his fingers over the side of his face, mouth opening to stretch out his jaw. "What the hell?"

"Well," Max sucks in her bottom lip, blue eyes widening in horror despite her nonchalance, "that's what you get for fucking with the high school hierarchy." She tells him, beating around an apology, "But, you know... sorry?"

"Come here." El beckons the boy toward her, and she softly cups the left side of his face in her palm, a sorry smile playing on her lips. Her thin brows draw together, corners of her mouth pursing as fresh color rises to his cheek, "Oh."

"Is it bad?" Mike squints with one eye, peering down at her. He places his hand over hers, threading their fingers together as her touch falls to his chin, "You'd tell me if it was bad, right?"

El giggles, kicking a leg out to curl it around his thighs, "Of course." She lets go of his hand and pulls on his shoulders until he's leaning down to her level. She presses her lips against the bruise that's slowly forming under his skin, "I'll make it better later."

"Is that also what you meant when you said he could *'put it anywhere'?*" Lucas teases, finally addressing the elephant in the room (or, well, the back parking lot?) He laughs to himself, earning a sharp jab in the ribs from his girlfriend. Max glares up at him, and he quickly throws his hands up apology, eyes wide in Mike's direction.

"No." Mike pulls a face, brows drawing together, "She was talking about my car but good to know where your head's at."

"Your car?"

"Yeah, where I should park it." Mike explains, "You know, when I went over for that project—"

"When you went over, or when you came over?" Dustin cuts on, smirking to himself even as his gaze remains on the ground.

"Okay," Lucas interrupts, holding up a hand and waving it about dismissively, "well what about the wet thing?"

"The..." Mike gulps, soft hint of color to his cheeks as he runs his index finger along his chin, "What *wet* thing?"

Lucas deepens his voice then, puckering his lips as he remembers, tries to quote one of Mike's text, "*Oh, you were so wet last night'...* or... whatever it was you said." He shrugs, leg jittering, "I don't remember, man."

"Yeah, no. Once again, not what you're thinking."

Shaking his head, Lucas hums disbelievingly with an snap of his fingers, "How is *that* not a sex thing?"

"It was literally raining two nights ago!"

"And you were just, what, stood out in it like a couple of weirdos?"

"Rain is romantic, Lukey." Max whines, jokingly.

El peeks over her boyfriend's shoulder, "Kind of?"

The redhead in front of her snorts, "Jesus, do you two hang out anywhere other than Mike's car? Fuck."

Dustin snickers from his spot down on the ground, calloused fingers running over the corner of the sketched-out parking space, "Obviously, it's their bone zone." He says, digging the ball of his hand into the concrete.

"*That* makes sense."

Max rolls her eyes, and she rests her arm on Lucas' shoulder with a sigh, "Perv."

Flushing, El looks up through long lashes. "I didn't, umm... " she starts, stammering, "I didn't realise how half of it sounded at first but then... I guess without context—"

Will cuts in then, a Sharpie in his fist as he finishes scribbling something down in his free palm. "She didn't know what an innuendo was." He explains, looking up at his friends with a slight smile and shrug. He turns to Mike, "Took care of that one for you."

The black-haired hoy sends him a puzzled look, "Thanks?"

"So wait," and Dustin holds up a hand then, "you guys haven't gone to Pound Town in Mike's car?"

"Jesus, are you all in withdrawal or something?" Mike frowns, and he sits down on the hood of his car, palms flat by his sides on the carbon. "Stop."

"Wow, you're really avoiding answering that one, huh?" Dustin's eyebrows wiggle and rise up to the bottom of his cap, "Interesting." He runs his index finger over his chin thoughtfully with a hum; wide, hazy eyes quickly shifting back and forth between his friends.

Max squints, eyes narrowing in on him. "Are you high?" She kneels down to grab his face between her hands, thumbs pulling his cheeks down to get a clear look into his eyes. "Holy shit!"

"We're at school!" Mike thwarts his friend, a hand flying out to smack the boy's bicep when Max drags him up to a stand.

Dustin brushes him off, and he shoos the redhead away with a flick of his hand. He yanks on the strings of his hoodie then, mindlessly pulling them tighter so the material gathers around his neck. "I did it for you, you assholes," he mutters, puppydog-like, "It's not my fault the burnouts have terms and conditions."

"You're a fucking idiot." Max tells him, but she's unable to hold back a bemused snort. She wraps an arm around her boyfriend's shoulders, waits for Lucas to grip her waist in return before leaning her head

against his arm. "But at least you're too spaced out to drive so we won't have to ride in your death trap of a car."

"Today was bad enough with Will becoming a pyromaniac." El voices, earning an eye-roll from her brother. She pushes up on the hood of Mike's car to grip his shoulders then, seeing as he was stood in front of her. "Piggyback me down?"

He places his hands over hers, hoisting her up onto his back with a smile, "Always."

El moves to stand up on the hood then, tightening her hold on Mike's shoulders as her legs wrap around his frame. He places his hands on her calves, keeping her steady as she hops onto his back with a huff.

"So much for hiding your relationship," Will jokes, and he jabs the cap of his permanent marker back into place before holding up his palm, "Look."

(There's a scribbled drawing on Will's palm, all black ink and thick edges. It's a sketch of El kissing an unidentified boy. There's a question mark where his face should be, but he's holding up a couple of Eggo waffles.)

"What is that?"

"It's you." Will looks up at Mike, shit-eating grin on his face. "See?"

Max pulls Will's arm toward her and Lucas then, eyes widening as she gasps, "Cute. You even got his gangly arms right!"

"Shut up."

El slides her arms around her boyfriend's neck, crossing her ankles around his front. "Ignore him." She pats his chest comfortingly, sighing, "He's a traitor."

"How? I told one person—a trustworthy person, no less—the truth. At least I'm not the one who told a *cheerleader*."

Mike throws a hand up defensively then, "That was an accident," he points out. "*She* found us."

"Kinky." Lucas smirks, "Seriously though, man, you could've just *not* hid out in the girls' room."

"That was my idea. I thought it would be safe." El admits with a blank expression. She chews a bottom lip for a second, "Stupid, really."

"Not entirely," Mike cranes his head to look back at her, tightening his grip on her legs, "It turns out we weren't the only ones with a secret." He shoots Dustin a knowing look.

"What?" Dustin's nostrils flare, and he eyes his friend skeptically, "What is that look? I don't know that look."

Mike smiles over at him, hands moving up grab El's knees as he wriggles his shoulders, "Jennifer Hayes totally has a crush on you."

"Wait—" Dustin moves to place a single palm flat against Mike's chest then, staring down at the ground as he takes in the information, "Are you being serious?" He asks, eyes closing, "or is this like that time you guys told me Stacey wanted me?"

The black-haired boy quirks a brow, casually shrugging as Dustin takes a step back as though he's truly floored by the news, "No, *that* was a joke." Mike explains with a tilt of his head, "Jennifer *really* likes you, she told me herself."

Dustin throws his hands up then, and he walks around in circles for a second before he stops and wriggles his fingers in Max's face, "I *told* you she wanted me!" He bounces up on his feet, fingers still moving, sneakers shifting the gravel beneath his soles, "I knew it!"

The redhead pulls her face, flipping him off with a smirk, "She probably just wants in on your extensive hairspray collection. You know how those girls are."

"Just because you don't like anyone outside of the five of us."

"Who says I even like *you*?" Max tries him, a challenging look on her face.

Dustin slowly starts backing it up, "You're a *fraud*! Lucas, you're dating an imposter." He wags a finger toward the girl, eyeing the

bandana on his friend's head. He walks back into the front of a car then, quickly reaching down to rub the back of his knee. "She's a phoney!"

"Oh, boo-hoo."

Zoning out, El nuzzles her head into the crook of Mike's neck. "Mike?" She presses her lips against his throat sweetly, whispers, "you got any snacks in that backpack?"

Lucas's eyes widen, "Is that code?"

Purposely ignoring him, Mike makes his way around to the side of his car. He bends down to lower El to the ground. She jumps down, but her hands remain against Mike's back as he yanks the side door open.

Backpack pulled up from off of the floor into the passenger seat, Mike makes quick work of unzipping it and retrieving a cling-wrap-covered stack of chilled waffles. There's four of them messily wrapped-up, and he turns around to place them in El's hands affectionally with a smile.

Having skipped out on lunch, El beams up at him, "Thank you." She pushes up on her tiptoes to press a quick kiss to the corner of his mouth, eyes closing momentarily. Then she's tucking in and unwrapping the food.

"I don't how you can eat them like that," Mike leans back against the door, having just closed it. He jingles his car keys, eyeing the Eggo waffles with a knit of his brows. "They need heating up."

El shakes her head, humming as she tears into the first one, "Nope," she mumbles after swallowing a bite, "they're perfect like this."

"You're only saying that because they're his." Max interjects.

The brunette shrugs, a sheepish grin on her face, "Half true." She beams up at her boyfriend, melting into him when he pulls her into his side and kisses her forehead adoringly.

"Gross."

Will coughs, "Jealous."

"As is, like, half of our grade." Lucas throws in.

"Shocking statistic, really, given half of them don't even know who Mike is, much less his well... alias." Max crosses her arms, "How long until we can leave, anyway? You know, since the school actually didn't burn down." The redhead reaches down to swipe her backpack up from off of the ground, swinging it over her shoulder.

"Shouldn't we head back to class?" El rasps, throat full of waffle that she tries to swallow down, hand pressed up against her mouth in modesty, "Like everyone else already did."

"No?" Max shrugs, and she shoots the youngest boy a knowing smirk, "We can't let Will's hard work go to waste. Afternoon at Benny's anybody?"

Will tilts his head to the side, considering. Then he nods, adjusting the strap of his satchel and pulling open the big flap, "Wait, did you want me to actually burn it down?" He stuffs his marker into the front pocket, laughing, "Or are you just jealous that you didn't think of it first?"

Max clears her throat, and she grabs Lucas' hand to pull him along as she starts to walk backward, towards her own car near the staff parking lot. "Just let us in on your schemes next time, Byers."

"If he did that, he wouldn't be the *weird* one." Lucas teases, amicably laying a hand on Will's back. "You need a ride?" He

Realising they've been walking away from Mike and El, Will glances back at the pair. Dustin's already gone—disappeared somewhere, and probably on the hunt for Jennifer Hayes— and his sister and his best friend are too busy staring at each other to pay them any attention; they haven't even noticed their friends' absence.

"El was my ride home so—"

"I wouldn't worry about her," Max cuts him off, backpack hanging by her fingertips as she shifts from one leg onto the other with a shake of her head. She stifles a laugh, earns a grin from Will in return, "She's got *Waffle Boy*."

Not a single one of them catches the girl standing off by the football field.

She appears only seconds before Max starts walking away, and she watches with a scowl, tugging on the bottom of her skirt, as three of the teens venture off in search of their own cars—and it's not the fact that they're leaving that rattles her. It's who they're leaving behind.

Because, right there, in the middle of the parking lot, is Jane Ives Hopper—her current rival for the school's attention. She's wearing those odd clothes again, all stripes and patterns, and light brown curls are falling from her ponytail to cradle her face.

She has her back pressed up against someone's car door while they rummage for something in the back, and there's a half-eaten waffle dangling from her fingertips.

The girl can all but watch as Jane shoves the food between her teeth, biting down into it, before she reaches up to pull the hair-tie from her curls and pass it to... *Mike Wheeler?*

(Wait...)

He slips the pink item over his wrist—the color clashing with his green top—and he leans down to kiss the girl on the cheek. And then he's pulling the passenger side door open again and Jane Ives Hopper is slipping inside and Mike Wheeler is smiling and—

Stacey gasps, then yells, "*What?!*"